

**Sandpit Dilemmas:
Challenges of researching young children**

Gaye Mackenzie BA Hons

**This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy of Murdoch University 2005**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution

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ABSTRACT

In the past twenty years there has been a movement against the tradition of positivist, scientific research that treats children as the 'object' of research. This movement has been led by the sociology of childhood literature but also has supporters in disciplines such as developmental psychology and early childhood studies. Research within this new paradigm often seeks to gain the perspectives and lived experiences of children, giving them a voice through naturalistic methodologies such as ethnography and informal interviews. However, giving children a 'voice' has not been purely an academic endeavour. Supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) which stipulates that States should assure that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, there is a push at all levels of government for children to be given a chance to express their views on issues that concern them. In Australia and overseas, the consulting of children on issues that concern them has become more commonplace. Thus in both research and policy development, methodologies which enable adults to get closer to the world of the child and to hear their views are being explored.

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This thesis explores some of the issues involved in this form of qualitative research with children. It does so through combining theoretical exposition and systematic reflection with the author's own empirical research which sought to gain an understanding of young children's views of 'difference' through an ethnographic methodology.

Part One provides the theoretical base for the thesis, by exploring how 'the child' and childhood have been conceptualised within western thought. Drawing on the sociology of childhood, it also probes a number of the implications of this tradition and examines how it has shaped research on children both in terms of the methods that have been employed and the topics that have been of interest.

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Both chapters in Part Two focus on the empirical component of the study. The first is an extended methodology chapter which explores not only the method employed and the research setting but also some of the challenges that the author faced in the field and a discussion of issues such as ethics and the status of the researcher. Using logs of the children's activities and the author's field journal, the next chapter explores how the initial research question altered and the issues that came to the fore during the research.

Part Three reconsiders a number of the theoretical issues raised in Part One in light of the fieldwork discussed in Part Two. It asks how certain ethnographic studies, claiming affiliation with the sociology of childhood, nevertheless ended up with depictions of children not far from the positivistic studies their authors had critiqued. It argues that this can be explained by the persistence of a 'problem centred' adultcentric frame which privileges understanding of a particular issue (e.g. the development of racism in children) over the actual experiences of individual children. Given the renewed interest in consulting children this proposition has practical as well as theoretical significance as it reveals how easy it is for slippage to occur and the importance of preventing it.

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Introduction

In 2001 I became involved in a project which carried the working title “Celebrating Diversity in Child Care”. Broadly, the aim of the project was to investigate the ways in which inclusive practices could be best effected in childcare. It was a collaborative project between Murdoch University and two industry partners – the Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs (RUCSN) and the City of Fremantle. Both of these agencies run Commonwealth funded Supplementary Services (SUPS). These programs aim to increase accessibility and participation for children with additional needs and to facilitate culturally and developmentally appropriate programs for these children.

The philosophy that drives the SUPS program is ‘inclusion’ or ‘inclusive practice’, a term which has been employed in Australia and internationally to encourage government and professional practices to recognise and incorporate diversity. While ‘inclusion’ often refers to the practice of incorporating children with disabilities into mainstream institutions, the Australian federal program targets four main groups. The priority groups for the SUPS program are: children of non-English speaking backgrounds; children with a disability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and Australian South Sea Islander children. The focus of these programs is to develop the

capacity of childcare services to cater for these children through the provision of training, programs, resources and/or facilities (Commonwealth Government 1996: 1-2).

While inclusion is not compulsory in Australia (Llewellyn et al 2002: 1), one of the accreditation requirements is the respect for diversity, as articulated in Principle 2.2 of the guidelines:

Principle 2.2: Staff respect diversity in the social and cultural background and abilities of all children and accommodate the individual needs of each child (QIAS Source Book 2001: 20).

In the first few weeks after taking up the project I decided to undertake some informal observation to orient myself to the issues and practices involved. I observed several information sessions for bilingual liaison workers who helped newly arrived migrant parents adapt to the childcare system in Australia and spent several days at the Murdoch University day care centre.

I began to feel that, while a lot of attention went into helping parents cope with the new customs and expectations inherent in their children's attendance at childcare in a new country, there was less discussion on what the children at childcare were actually experiencing and what was important to them. While parents and carers were concerned about issues such as the wearing of shoes,

feeding patterns and so on, it was by no means clear that such things were the most important factors in how the children felt about being at childcare. What, I wondered, were the factors that helped make any particular child feel 'included' or welcome? Did children exclude children who fell into the 'special needs' group because they were 'different'? Were the differences that were important to adults important to young children? What might difference mean to children?

These questions informed the basis of both my fieldwork, which I will come to shortly, and the conceptual study which was to become a major part of the thesis. These conceptual foundations were initially informed by the extensive sociology of childhood literature. Its deconstructive account of children and childhood (which started in the 1970s but has developed in earnest since the 1990s) challenges the concept of 'the child' as a natural and universal phenomenon. Whilst not ignoring the biological reality of the immaturity of children, it looks at how different societies conceptualise this immaturity and what this means for children (and adults). For example when is 'childhood' deemed to be 'over'? What are children thought capable of doing?

The deconstructive challenge of the sociology of childhood literature encouraged me to look afresh at my research issue. At the same time as I was reading it, I was also researching the extensive literature produced by mainstream educationists, psychologists and indeed, sociologists, about children, child development and the ways in which children notice and deal with difference. Straddling these two bodies of work led me to one of the main questions underlying the thesis: namely, the ways in which experts and professionals have come to understand children and difference and the implications of those understandings. I felt that answering this question involved unravelling three quite distinct terms contained in the phrase ‘researching children and difference’, namely:

- Children (what is ‘the child’?, what assumptions do we make as adults about children and childhood? How has this come to be?)
- Researching children (what social factors have shaped the type of research that is done on children? What is the aim of the research? What can adults ‘know’ about children?)
- Difference (what is ‘difference’? why do we focus on physical aspects of difference – eg the colour of people’s skin).

I believe that these three factors influence the *starting point* of any research – they infiltrate understandings before the research has even begun, shaping our ways of conceptualising children, what we think we can know about them and the differences seen to be important to

children. They also shape the way we actually go about doing the research, prioritising some forms over others. Unpacking these starting points was, I realised, fundamental to my wish to understand more about the ways we had come to “know” about children and difference.

As well as the conceptual investigation (the foundations of which are discussed in Part One of the thesis), I also undertook a small scale empirical study (the subject of Part Two of the thesis). This involved spending three mornings a week in a childcare centre for four months, observing three and four year old children in their outdoor “free play” period. As explained below, the methods whereby I undertook this study were shaped by my readings in the sociology of childhood, but my intentions were soon overtaken and disturbed by the fieldworks own ‘unsettling’ process.

After reviewing sociology of childhood literature and traditional forms of research on children and prejudice I was clear about what I did *not* want to do. In essence the literature warned against seeing children as research objects rather than people in their own right and emphasised the importance of seeing the actions of children within the context they occurred. On this basis, I decided to conduct an ethnographic study which sought to ascertain patterns of inclusion

and exclusion in the children's interactions. Rather than approach the study with the aim of understanding how children perceived certain types of pre-defined difference, I wished to trace the children's actual patterns of inclusion and exclusion to determine whether the same 'markers' appeared to be important to them as to adults. However, the assumptions underlying this were soon challenged, resulting in a process of interpretation and reinterpretation that persisted throughout the empirical research and well into the analysis and writing up stages. In essence, the process of undertaking this empirical research, what I learned from it and how it changed my ideas, also had a direct impact on the way in which I thought and wrote about the broader conceptual questions.

The Structure of the Thesis

In Part One I draw on primary and secondary sociological, psychological, historical and philosophical texts to elucidate how our dominant understandings of children have been formed. The purpose of this exploration is not to provide a comprehensive account of each but rather to "problematise" them, to unsettle the "taken-for-grantedness" of the dominant ways of seeing. In Chapter One I trace how dominant conceptions of 'the child' and childhood have developed in western society, particularly over the past century. This discussion is structured into two themes. The first, *The Child as the Nation's*

Future examines how a teleological conception of the child has been entrenched through a century of science that sees children as the hope for a better society and as a series of stages that must be completed before reaching the ultimate goal of adulthood. As noted previously, theorists working in the sociology of childhood have problematised this way of looking at childhood and in the last part of this chapter I review some of the central arguments of this literature. Chapter Two first examines how mainstream conceptions of the child have shaped research and then returns to the sociology of childhood literature to explore how they challenge these research methods and the way of seeing children as research 'objects'. In Chapter Three I turn specifically to research on racism and prejudice in children and review the methodologies employed in light of the argument developed in Chapters One and Two. This chapter also provides a background to my own study in terms of the method employed.

Part Two discusses my empirical study in the childcare centre. My methodology and the experience of doing the research, and the kinds of changes which took place, are discussed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five describes the day-to-day rhythms of the centre and then details what I came to see in the childcare centre and my reflections on these observations.

In many respects, my empirical research was an attempt to do things differently and see what emerged when I did. In this way it was a partial attempt to answer my foundational question of whether it was possible to see things more directly and authentically from the viewpoint of the child – to understand his or her sense of ‘difference’ without imposing adult conceptions at the outset. Early on, I found that there was plenty of literature giving reasons why we should attempt to develop a more active, child-centred approach. It pointed out how traditional research tends to provide a ‘static’ picture that ignores cultural diversity and differences between children, treating children as passive recipients of societal knowledge. Against this, authors such as James and Prout (1988) argue that research must acknowledge children’s agency in their own lives. This, in its turn, led to a body of literature that examines how one should do research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ children. This has presented the sociology of childhood with some major theoretical challenges, not least of which is the difficulty inherent in conceptualising children as social actors in their own right while acknowledging the structural influences that shape their lives.

That something yet more fundamental than this might be at stake was suggested both by my readings of certain research studies that had attempted to ‘do better’ and by my own reflections on my

fieldwork. In a nutshell, I became aware how difficult it was to push the new insights forward at a conceptual level and how often they were observed in the breach. In this respect I came to endorse James et al's observation that our dominant perceptions of childhood, shaped as they are by psychological and sociological concerns, have "overwhelmed our capacity to theorize childhood" (James et al 1998: 196). Our conceptions of children and childhood, in other words, have become so established that it is difficult to think outside of them.

Thus, in Part Three I reconsider a number of the theoretical issues raised in Part One in light of the fieldwork discussed in Part Two. Chapter Six asks how certain ethnographic studies, claiming affiliation with the sociology of childhood, nevertheless ended up with depictions of children not far from the positivistic studies their authors critique. It argues that this can be explained by the persistence of a 'problem centred' adultcentric frame which privileges understanding of a particular issue (e.g. the development of racism in children) over the actual experiences of individual children. It contrasts research that retains a focus on 'the child' with research that has 'children' at its centre and examines how the distinction regarding the primary purpose of the research has a crucial influence in the way that research is conducted and presented. In Chapter

Seven I return briefly to the original topic of my study: inclusive practice in childcare to discuss some of the implications for practice that might be gleaned from the insights I gained during my time in the field.

PART I

Chapter 1: What Is the Child And Childhood?

Childhood is unknown. Starting from the false idea one has of it, the farther one goes, the more one loses one's way.

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Preface *Emile* or *On Education* 1762)

Over at least the last two decades there has been a steady challenge to the notion of the child as a universal, acultural, ahistorical, apolitical phenomena. This has been led by sociologists (e.g. Jenks 1982; James & Prout 1990; Qvortrup 1994 and Alanen 1992; 1994), but is also evident in the disciplines of history (e.g. Hendrick 1997; and Somerville 1982), philosophy (e.g. Archard 1993 and Archard & Macleod 2002) and law (e.g. McGillivray 1997 and Freeman 1996). While not dismissing the reality of the biological immaturity of children, accounts which see 'the child' and 'childhood' as social constructions or 'cultural inventions' (Hatch 1995) challenge us to examine what different societies (both historically and culturally) make of this immaturity (Hendrick 1997: 10). These accounts reason that how societies 'invent' notions of the child and childhood determines how children are seen and treated by adults and indeed how children come to see themselves.

The origins of the sociology of childhood are often (e.g. James & Prout 1997, James et al 1998) traced back to the work of the historian

Phillip Aries and his book *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). This book posited that, as a concept, childhood did not emerge until between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Aries 1962: 125). The historical accuracy of Aries' account has been criticised by theorists such as Pollock (1983) and Archard (1993). Pollock and Archard share the position that whilst previous societies might have lacked our contemporary conceptualisation of childhood it does not necessarily follow that they lacked *any* conceptualisation of childhood (Archard 1993: 20). However, these critiques aside, Aries' most important contribution from a sociological standpoint is the fact that, on its publication in the 1960s, it started to challenge the ahistorical and acultural conceptualisations of childhood that had developed.

In his critique of Aries' work, David Archard (1993) offers an important distinction between the *concept* of childhood and the *conception* of childhood, demonstrating why Aries' claim that medieval society had no concept of childhood is problematic. The distinction between these two terms is also useful in articulating the parameters of childhood as a social construction:

The *concept* of childhood requires that children be distinguishable from adults in respect of some unspecified set of attributes. A *conception* of childhood is a specification of those attributes. In simple terms, to have a concept of 'childhood' is to recognise that children differ interestingly from adults; to have a conception of childhood is to have a

view of what those interesting differences are (Archard 1993: 22).

It is the dominant *conception* of children and childhood, or what James and Prout describe as the 'dominant framework' (James & Prout 1997: 10), that is scrutinised by contemporary academics. It is not my intention to recover this ground here, rather, in this chapter I wish to examine two dominant conceptions, one of the child and one of childhood, which shape the way that research on children is developed and carried out. The first of these is an image of the child as the nation's future, particularly as influenced by the developmental model and the liberal ideal. The second is a notion of childhood as a time of innocence and vulnerability, play and fun. This schema enables this review of the literature to cover the dominant issues of the sociology of childhood and also to situate the empirical research on children's social worlds in Part II. This chapter also discusses some of the possible consequences of the dominant frameworks.

The Child as the Nation's Future

[Childhood is] a period of growth, that is to say, the period in which the individual, in both the physical and moral sense, does not yet exist, the period in which he (sic) is made, develops and is formed... In everything, the child is characterised by the very instability of his nature, which is the law of growth. The educationalist is presented not with a person wholly formed – not a complete work or a finished product – but with a becoming, an incipient being, a person in the process of formation (Durkheim 1911 in Pickering 1979: 150).

In his book *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, John Sommerville (1982) outlines how children and childhood have been regarded from as early as 1800BC. In showing how Spartan childrearing practices focussed on developing strong future soldiers while Athenian practices emphasised the importance of the education of upper-class boys, Sommerville demonstrates that children have always been seen (to varying extents) for what they will become: the future of the clan, tribe or nation – in a sense the ‘apprentice’ adult. Prout and James (1997) observe that this conception of child as ‘apprentice’ forms an important element of our current paradigm, entrenched as it is by developmental approaches to childhood. Thus, Smart, Neale and Wade point to prevalent notions of ‘children as embryonic adults’ (Smart et al 2001: 3) or the ‘child as project’ (Smart et al 2001: 7), while Archard refers to the importance of ‘teleology’ in the development model of children whereby adulthood is regarded as the ideal end-state which children progress towards (Archard 1993: 33).

How adults seek to mould worthy future members of society varies historically and is also shaped by perceptions about the natural state of children. In this respect, the work of John Jacques Rousseau is particularly important in its influence on our contemporary conceptions of children (James, Jenks & Prout 1998; Mills & Mills 2000; and Hendricks 1997). Indeed, Archard notes that Rousseau

has been credited with actually establishing a modern view of childhood (Archard 1993: 22). This view is strongly put by Robertson (1976):

If the philosophy of the Enlightenment brought to eighteenth century Europe a new confidence in the possibility of human happiness, special credit must go to Rousseau for calling attention to the needs of children. For the first time in history, he made a large group of people believe that childhood was worth the attention of intelligent adults, encouraging an interest in the process of growing up rather than just the product. Education of children was part of the interest in progress which was so predominant in the intellectual trends of the time (Robertson 1976: 407).

Rousseau believed that children were moral innocents with a natural goodness who required freedom to express themselves (James et al 1998: 13). His belief that humans were born innocent and that it was social convention that ultimately corrupted is famously encapsulated in the introductory lines of *Emile*: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (Rousseau, 1979). This view has ramifications for the role of parents and educators who are charged with the responsibility of protecting the innocent child from the ugliness and violence that surrounds them (James et al 1998: 14) and for producing the ‘good’ adult.

Rousseau’s view of the child and his subsequent ideas on freedom in childrearing were in stark contrast to the evangelical beliefs of the

same era and their revival in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The doctrine of 'original sin' saw the child as born innately sinful due to the wayward choices of Adam and Eve. This belief shaped advice regarding child-rearing practices that sought to rid the child of badness. In the words of John Wesley, Methodist leader in Southey (1732):

Break their wills betimes, begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pains it costs, break the will, if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and to cry softly; from that age make him (sic) do as he is bid, if you whip him ten times running to effect it. If you spare the rod, you spoil the child; if you do not conquer you ruin him. Break his will now, and his soul shall live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity (Wesley in Southey 1925: 304-5).

As Cleverley and Phillips note, breaking the will of the child thus became crucial to parenting, with strict discipline, prayers and a lack of things to 'gratify the senses' being important parts of a strict regime designed to achieve this (Cleverly & Phillips 1987: 29 – 34).

Pointing in yet another direction is the influence of evolutionary theory subsequent to the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* in 1859. John Somerville shows how evolutionary theory brought with it a view of humans which emphasised their animal characteristics at the expense of spiritual aspects. In the wake of this, children, who had been most exalted under the Rousseau

inspired ideal, were 'taken down from their pedestal' and demythologised (Sommerville 1982: 209). Further, the evolutionary paradigm had three major ramifications for the way that children were now seen. First, child upbringing was no longer only important in terms of how a particular child would develop into an adult, but also held the key to the improvement of the human species on a generation by generation basis. As Ehrenreich and English state, "In the child lay the key to the control of human evolution" (Ehrenreich & English 1979: 1986).

Second, philosophical introspection regarding children's nature was no longer sufficient. Scientists realised that they knew little of how children grew and 'the child' now became an object of study. From here, as Sommerville notes, came the development of scientific endeavours which sought to understand children with the goal of improving them, both as children and as the adults that they would become. Thus, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw the development of a series of tests and measures centred on children's aptitude, physical growth and achievement (Sommerville 1982: 211). The issue of how children came to be 'known' will be returned to in Chapter Two which examines the development of research on children.

Third, as Archard (1993) notes, Darwin firmly tied the life of the child to evolutionary theory. In 'A Biographical Sketch of the Infant', published in 1877, Darwin argued that the beginnings of human life in the form of the infant could provide an understanding of the beginning of human life more generally (Archard 1993: 32). The German scientist Ernst Haeckel formulated this idea into 'biogenetic law' which postulates that individual human development from embryo to adult replicates the development of the species or race (Archard 1993: 32). This theory of 'recapitulation' is succinctly explained by Cleverley and Phillips:

Thus, if mammals evolved from reptiles, and reptiles evolved from amphibians and fish, then during embryonic development a young mammal will pass through a fish, an amphibian and then a reptile stage (Cleverley & Phillips 1987: 43)

Herbert Spencer believed that recapitulation could be applied to numerous phenomena – the solar system, societies, as well as organisms and species. In his *Essays on Education* (1861) Spencer saw education as a means to “carry each child’s mind through a process like that which the mind of humanity at large has gone through” (Spencer 1949: 7).

Archard (1993) notes that this biogenetic law strongly influenced the work of Sigmund Freud. Within such a framework, development of

the child into adult was a unilinear process, one stage building on the next, with adulthood as the end-state. Abnormal outcomes in the adult could be attributed to disruptions in the developmental path. The theory of recapitulation is evident in the belief that each stage of development moves the child to a more complex level (Archard 1993: 33). Thus, Freud provided another element to the developing conception of the child and childhood: childhood as the adult's past (James et al 1998: 20). This framework had a double effect: it enabled psychosis in adulthood to be 'explained' by examining, through psychoanalysis, conditions in childhood and it also highlighted the importance of the provision of the 'correct' conditions in childhood necessary to the production of the 'healthy' adult and firmly established this causal relationship between childhood 'trauma' and adulthood psychosis. However, Sommerville makes the important point that Freud's ideas have often been taken out of context and over-simplified and his cautionary words are worth quoting at length:

If certain tensions are known to cause psychological problems, it is tempting to assume that they invariably do so. Actually, it may be that what is found in the sick could be found in us all, to varying degrees. But the first reaction was to suppose that where there is a problem there must be a solution. If tension can lead to neurosis, then we must ensure tension-free lives for our children. If an unrepressed life sounds desirable, then it must be possible. To this end, the popular mind has turned Freudianism into preventative medicine. Freud himself held out no hope for this kind of perfectionism and would have dismissed the idea of an

entirely unrepressed and uninhibited life as a fantasy (Sommerville 1982: 217).

The developmental model of childhood with one stage building on the next was given further credence by the work of Jean Piaget from the 1920s. Erica Burman (1994), in her exploration of Piaget's work, notes the influence that biological evolutionary principles had on Piaget's work. Piaget was not interested in children *per se*, but rather what would come to be called 'genetic epistemology' or the study of knowledge, specifically with regard to the growth of knowledge in children (Burman 1994: 153). From the biological evolutionary principles of assimilation, accommodation and equilibration, Piaget proposed a theory about the development of knowledge in children (and thus the human species). This theory saw the cognitive development of children as a process whereby the environment could be assimilated by the child through the construction of a set of cognitive structures. Encountering a new difficulty would disrupt a child's mental equilibrium, forcing her to make an addition to her mental apparatus; cognitive development then occurred and the child moved back to a state of equilibrium. As Piaget explains:

The psychological development that starts at birth and terminates in adulthood is comparable to organic growth. Like the latter, it consists essentially of activity directed toward equilibrium. Just as the body evolves toward a relatively stable level characterised by the completion of the growth process and by organ maturity, so mental life can be

conceived as evolving toward a final form of equilibrium represented by the adult mind (Piaget 1967: 1).

Building on this, Piaget and his colleagues produced a theory of cognitive development in which the child was seen to pass through a series of stages through to adulthood (Piaget 1967: 5,6).

Again, through Piaget's framework, children were placed at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder as what Ehrenreich and English refer to as a kind of 'evolutionary protoplasm' (Ehrenreich & English 1979: 186). Archard observes the normative nature of this developmental model in that the state of adulthood is regarded as the end product, an achievement. Each stage is seen to build on and is incorporated into the next, culminating in a more and more complex understanding. This means that each stage is regarded as not only a quantitative improvement but also a qualitative one, producing a particular view of adulthood whereby "adulthood is not more of what childhood has less of; it is of a different and higher order" (Archard 1993: 33). For Piaget, understanding the cognitive development of children (and thereby humans) could inform the quest for human progress:

Childhood, I believe, will furnish an explanation of our difficulties and failings. At the same time, however, it will teach us how to do better than we have done, showing us the reserves of energy that exist in human beings and the

sort of education that will enable us to rise above our present level of development (Piaget 1933: 13).

Piaget's work had considerable significance for the theory and practice of teaching, helping to move education from what Piaget described as the "traditional school" to the "new methods of education" (Piaget 1971: 145). For Piaget, the traditional method constrained the student, "imposing" work on the student by the teacher. On the other hand, the new method "appeals to real activity to spontaneous work based upon personal need and interest" (Piaget 1971: 152).

While, as Burman notes, the influence that Piaget's work had on the development of pedagogical practice was extensive (Burman 1994, 163-176), the influence of his work spread wider than childhood education. In particular, the division of the life of the growing child into stages enabled the more detailed calibration of the child. Just as medical practitioners could measure and tabulate the physiological growth of children and thereby establish 'normal' ranges of height and weight, developmental psychologists could now predict and measure 'normal' cognitive and social development. As James, Jenks and Prout (1998) point out, this standard of 'normality' became that against which the child was judged (James, Jenks & Prout 1998: 19).

My exploration so far suggests that the view of the child as the future hope of humankind was becoming well entrenched during the first half of the twentieth century. Evolutionary theory opened up the possibility that humankind had some kind of control over its future development and provided - through recapitulation theory - a framework for understanding the development of children through to adulthood. Freud had brought attention to the importance of childhood for the healthy functioning in adulthood and Piaget had provided a schema which both explained the cognitive development of children and enabled adults to envisage how they might shape this development. As a result, from the early 1900s children came under the gaze of experts who observed and measured them so that they might be understood and their formative childhood years could be shaped.

The key to solving societal ills came to lie in the way in which children were reared and educated and a lot of money and effort was put into discovering the 'correct' childrearing techniques. For example, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Foundation in the United States spent \$7 million in the drive for expert-controlled child raising during the 1920s (Cleverley & Phillips 1987: 208). Under this venture, parents were instructed by experts about appropriate ways to bring up their children. The American behaviourist John B. Watson was an

important influence at this time, with his child-rearing book *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928) becoming the authoritative work on parenting (Somerville 1982: 213). Watson advocated 'conditioning' children through the application of strict feeding schedules, early toilet training and cooler relations between parents and their children. Too much affection, he believed, resulted in "sentimentality, dependency and an invalid complex" (Somerville 1982: 213). Somerville also notes that parents were incited to feel guilt if unable to be completely consistent with the regimes recommended.

The production of strict parenting guidelines was just one element of what both Hendricks and Somerville term the 'standardisation' of childhood whereby through compulsory schooling, welfare, youth groups and the juvenile justice system, attempts were made to shape children into the conforming ideal envisaged (Hendricks 1997; Somerville 1982). A number of theorists (e.g. Hopkins 1994, Wardle 1974, Somerville 1982) agree that the first of these – compulsory schooling – was a pivotal factor in the way that children were reconceptualised at the time. David Wardle goes so far as to state that the rise of formal schooling was "accompanied by a change in attitude towards children so fundamental as to make it reasonable to say that childhood was invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries” (Wardle 1974: 27). As Hendrick notes, compulsory schooling involved far more than simply the academic education of children. In his discussion of classroom practices, he describes the way educationists attempted to shape children (especially working class children) in terms of discipline, respect for authority and structure. As part of this movement, previous divisions between urban and rural schools in countries such as the United Kingdom were (in theory at least) to be removed in the quest for a ‘truly *national* childhood’ (Hendrick 1997: 12). Compulsory schooling also enabled the ‘proper’ segregation of children from adults for a fixed period of the day during which they could be taught both their place as children and as future adults (Hendrick 1997: 73).

The Child and the State

Behind many of the developments outlined so far lies the hand of the state. The work of theorists such as Donzelot (1979), Rose (1989) and McGillivray (1997) are particularly important in describing its role in assisting in the process of ‘standardisation’. In his seminal work *The Policing of Families* (1979) Jacques Donzelot adopts a Foucaultian framework to examine how regulatory practices were developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to enable the improvement of the quality of the population whilst still heeding liberal political ideals:

How was it possible to ensure the development of practices of preservation and formation of the population while at the same time detaching it from any directly political role and yet applying to it a mission of domination, pacification and social integration? (Donzelot 1979: 55).

Donzelot examines how, through the tutelage of the 'psy' disciplines, the family, particularly the working class family, was to become the focus of programs aimed at the normalisation of difficult and deviant children. He argues that rather than using regulatory or coercive measures, psychoanalysis worked to align "familial values and social norms" (Donzelot 1979: xxiv) by working with parents' own desires:

By playing on the educative strategy of the family, psychoanalysis introduced a concern with the observance of social norms in the family without colliding head on with it, but rather ... taking support from its desire. Psychoanalysis made the family *amenable to social requirements, a good conductor of relational norms* (Donzelot 1979: 209 *emphasis in original*).

Thus, it is important to note that the state was (and still is) forming children against a 'liberal' standard invested with notions of personal freedom, democracy and limitations on rule. As Archard (1993) argues, the 'liberal standard' presumes certain things about the state's role in regard to the family:

First, the State has a legitimate interest in the welfare of children but, second, it acts as their caretaker in the last, or at least not first instance. Third, the State assumes a public role in protecting children which is initially circumscribed by the private space of the family (Archard 1993: 111).

Hence, while the liberal state has a vested interest in the well-being and development of children, the presumption is that these children will be raised in families which fall within the private domain and, therefore – in the first instance – outside the control of the state. Within such a framework, subject to certain conditions, parents are entitled to autonomy and freedom to bring up their children in the way that they see fit (Archard 1993: 111). This, however, as Rose (1989) points out, is conditional on parents and families demonstrating the capacities of self-regulation and (reasonably) democratic governance.

From another perspective, Barbara Arneil (2002) reminds us of the importance of the notion of ‘rational capacity’ in classical liberal theory. In the movement away from the rule of monarchy, citizens came to be regarded as worthy of participation in politics due to their ‘rationality’. However, an important distinction was made between the rational adult and the non-rational child. On this basis, children are seen as ‘citizens in waiting’ who, as yet, do not possess the reason and autonomy necessary for citizenship and, most importantly, need to be educated to develop the attributes of citizenship (Arneil 2002: 70).

The broad influence of the developmental model and the particular influences of the liberal ideal are evident in contemporary parenting literature. Thus, the West Australian Government's advisory pamphlets comment that:

Parents start with a helpless infant and turn him or her into a *happy, well adjusted, responsible* adult member of society. ... Then parents teach children to look after themselves, to know right from wrong, to be responsible for their own actions, to be able to control their anger, to make right choices – all of the things which go into making a balanced, responsible person (WA Government 1995: 2 *emphasis added*).

These sentiments are echoed in parenting books such as *Parenting Young Children* (Dinkmeyer et al 1989). Dinkmeyer et al note that historically parents were seen to have “succeeded at their job” if their offspring survived through to adulthood without them succumbing to disease or violence. Today's parents, they argue, have a “more complicated vision” and wish to raise children who are (among other things – the list comprises eleven qualities): responsible and co-operative, successful, respectful of others' feelings and property, and self-reliant (Dinkmeyer et al 1989: 5).

While reminding parents that children are unique, both the West Australian *Living with Children* publication and *Parenting Young Children* include a chart that maps the developmental process. This is common to parenting advice books and guides, demonstrating the

influence of the developmental model. The chart setting out the developmental stages of children from four to twelve years of age is included below (fig 1).

Fig 1: Developmental stages of children from four to 12 years of age

Age	Physical development	General behaviour	Language & Education	Typical personality	Common normal 'problems'	Common misconceptions
4	Can climb a ladder; walks up and down stairs with ease	Fully toilet trained; can almost dress and undress self; eats with fork and spoon; washes and dries hands	Engages in coherent conversation; gives name; age and address; understands time	Uses imagination to try out new things; increasingly self sufficient lively; can share – not always successfully	Noisy and assertive; wilful; makes up stories that didn't happen; explores, wanders; shows off, swears	Liar; disobedient; aggressive; bossy; cheeky
5	Runs quite well; right or left handedness now fairly clear	Dresses and undresses without aid; washes and dries face and hands; plays constructively; draws recognisable human and house; elaborate make believe group play.	Speaks fluently; counts objects up to about 20	Serious minded; practical; cooperative; is learning to share; thrives on praise	Tells fanciful tales (using imagination); swears; may still suck thumb	Tells 'whoppers'; lies; foul mouthed; babyish
6	More skilful now in use of hands; may be able to ride a bicycle; starts to lose first teeth and acquire permanent molars.	Casual and careless in washing and dressing; draws pictures with some supporting detail; knows left hand from right hand	Begins to read and prints letters and simple words; reads and writes numbers; adds and subtracts single digit numbers	Excitable, impulsive and changeable; may seem rude or aggressive.	Mild sex play; exhibitionism in toilet; fearful – sounds, ghosts, being lost; slow to follow instructions; wants to be first and to have the most; boasts.	Pervert; sook; lazy; selfish; a bragger
7	Shows some elementary skill in bat and ball games, skipping, hopscotch; is able to learn to swim or to play musical instrument	Shows increased awareness and understanding of the world around; polite and anxious to impress	Reads simple words and sentences; prints large and small letters; adds within 20 and subtracts within 10	Quiet and thoughtful; shows sense of responsibility	Forgets instructions; "Nobody loves me"; jealous of older siblings getting more privileges; sex play but occurring less often	Disobedient; lazy; selfish; ungrateful
8	Physical play very lively; sporting skills develop markedly	Bathes, dresses, sleeps and eats well; talks to strangers; takes part in team sports; drawings show some proportion and perspective	Reads with understanding; learns running writing; starts to add and subtract two or three digit numbers and multiply and divide single digit numbers	Self reliant, sociable and outgoing; active; may be critical of others; popularity and success are very important outside the family; aware of own failures.	Failure hard to cope with; tempted to cheat; does not finish tasks and may cry if failure is mentioned	Oversensitive; cant stick to anything; cant accept criticism
9	Adept with hands and fingers; special skills such as sport and music become evident	Well behaved; perseveres in work or play; self sufficient and may enjoy being alone	Masters basic techniques of reading, writing, adding, subtracting, multiplying, and	Sensible; self motivated; may be shy in social situations; may talk about sex	Worried and anxious; has physical complaints such as stomach	Neurotic; undisciplined

			dividing; reads stories and writes brief letters to relatives	information with friends; interested in body organs and functions; less afraid of dark; not afraid of water.	aches and headaches when has to do disliked tasks; rebels against authority; sex swearing beginning; perseveres with tasks.	
10	Has natural command of basic physical skills such as dressing, feeding, ball games and bike riding	Quite the little adult – able to shop alone, go to school camps; asks about social issues.	Reads well; does long multiplication and long division by one digit numbers; writes stories up to about a page in length.	Cool, clam and collected; generally a peaceful age; accepts parent's word as law	Interest in smutty jokes; name calling and may physically fight with siblings	
10-12	Early adolescence; rapid physical change with the development of pubic hair, breasts in girls, pimples and gawkiness	Develops strong sexual feelings; concern with own identity and values; wants to be listened to and taken seriously; experiments and takes risks; questions parents' values		Impulsive; strong emotions; large mood swings; self conscious; relates strong to age mates; less dependent on family; wants more privacy	Takes risks; rebellious; over sensitive about appearance; over optimistic; confident; unrealistic; preoccupation with sexual matters; doesn't want to join in family activities	Delinquent; cant be trusted to be responsible with sex, drugs etc; doesn't love parents; no longer influenced by parents

(WA Government 1995)

The provision of tables such as this provides an important link between the knowledge of developmental psychology to the role of parenting by making available - in an accessible form - the knowledge required by parents to monitor and guide their child's progress. As Rose points out, since the 1960s mothers have been assigned a vital role in the cognitive development of their child (Rose 1989: 182). He notes that, in the years preceding formal education, the mother's role is promoted as being vital in the preparation for the school years:

Psychological theories of cognitive development and the importance of the 'early years' have transformed the everyday life of the household into a complex of educational opportunities. The mother is to precede the teacher; her daily routines and response to the wants and troubles of her children are to be conducted in the interests of her child's mental development. If she plays her part well, the child's future life chances will be immeasurably enhanced, if she

fails through ignorance or impatience to realize or to actualise such a learning scheme, woe betide her child when he or she enters school (Rose 1989: 182).

Central to these preschool years is the concept of play as an educative tool and the importance of providing opportunities for children to develop social skills through contact with their peers. Thus, play and early friendships have come to be seen as a necessary component of the developmental process.

Play and friendship: for the future

Virtually all early childhood educators espouse play as a sacred right of childhood, as the way in which young humans learn, as a major avenue through which children learn to be happy, mentally healthy beings (Cannella 1997: 124).

The association between children's play and learning can be traced to the development of the kindergarten and early education movements in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, and more particularly the work of Froebel and Montessori (Saracho & Spodek 2003: 2). Saracho and Spodek note, however, that whilst these early educators used their observations of play to inform curriculum development, children's play activities at that time were actually quite structured. It was the 'experimentalist' John Dewey's work in the early 1900s that provided the basis for contemporary understandings of the role of play in children's education (Saracho & Spodek 2003: 3). Dewey and other

experimentalists argued that humans are ‘self-directing organisms’ who actively seek out “objects and experiences which will serve as instruments for the achievement of its purposes” (McNally 1973: 79). For Dewey then, education is about encouraging this natural process, and the teacher is the ‘guide’.

The role of play in the cognitive, emotional and social development of young children is also central to Piaget’s work (Burman 1994; Cannella 1997; Saracho & Spodek 2003). Piaget’s theories of assimilation and accommodation, as discussed earlier in this chapter, also shaped his theories on play. Here he argued that play, like the broader development of the child, passed through a series of stages. The first of these is *sensory-motor play* with a focus on physical activity; the second is *symbolic play* which starts at approximately eighteen months until age seven; and the third stage is *games with rules* (Piaget 1962). Within this framework, the movement from one stage to the next sees a decrease in the previous mode of play; for example when a child starts to play games that have rules, symbolic play will decrease (Saracho & Spodek 2003: 10). The movement through these stages reflects the cognitive development of the child (she cannot move onto the next stage until she is ‘ready’ to do so), but play is also a driving force for development (Dockett 1999: 32) as the

child learns by exploring the world and learning through experimenting with objects and situations.

Saracho and Spodek argue that the importance of play is also central to Berlyne's (1969) and Ellis' (1973) adaptation of the biological basis of Piaget's idea. In Berlyn's (1969) "Arousal Seeking/Modulation Theory" of play, later modified by Ellis (1973), the child is driven by a need in the central nervous system which maintains arousal at optimal levels. Play, therefore, "lets the organism (sic) find sources of arousal to capture information" (Saracho & Spodek 2003: 8). According to this theory, children require stimulation to facilitate this process, to enable them to reach their potential.

Theories of the importance of play in cognitive development are complimented by an equally strong emphasis on the role of play in emotional development. These notions were initially developed by Freud (1938) and later taken up by psychoanalysts such as Erikson (1963) and Axline (1974). Freud believed that play provided unique and important opportunities for children to relieve themselves of negative emotions and enable them to communicate their feelings – resulting in better emotional equilibrium (Saracho & Spodek 2003: 8). For these theorists, children can also utilise play to act out past, present and future events, thus helping them to understand and cope

with their lives and develop a 'sense of competence' (Saracho & Spodek 2003: 8). One of the products of this conceptualisation of play is in 'play therapy' whereby children's emotions are drawn out through play and children are encouraged to 'work through' difficult situations.

A similar focus is applied to children's friendships with them being seen as a necessary part of the developmental process. The psychological interest in the peer relationships of children can be traced back to Parten who, in 1932, identified five levels of social play: solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play and cooperative play. Within the developmental framework, progression through these types of play are linked to a child's development, for example, very young children are not seen to have the skills or information necessary to engage in cooperative play (James et al 1998: 94). The main impetus for this interest is that relationships are seen to be important to a child's social development, and conversely, the lack of peer relationships is considered a possible predictor of social problems in adulthood (Bukowski & Hoza 1989). Thus, Bukowski and Hoza note:

A fundamental and widely accepted premise of the social development literature is the proposal that childhood peer relationships contribute uniquely to social and emotional development (Bukowski & Hoza 1989: 15).

As this section has illustrated, over the course of the last century it has transpired that under the gaze of the experts (or by proxy, the child's parents), no facet of the child's life is left unscrutinised. Even the children's leisure time has been reconceptualised as a building block in the development of the future adult. As Rose notes, "childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence" (Rose 1989: 123).

An Ideal Childhood of Innocence and Fun

While much of the attention on children and the 'formative' years of childhood centres on the creation of good adults for the good of the nation, there is yet another influence that has shaped the way that children and childhood are perceived. As discussed earlier, Rousseau's ideas on children's innocence and goodness provided a contrast to the evangelical conception of original sin and evil residing in the child. The projection of the child as 'innocent' also features heavily in later eighteenth and nineteenth century literature (for discussion see James et al 1998; James & Prout 1997; Archard 1993; Hendrick 1997; Sommerville 1982; and Mills & Mills 2000). The poetry of Blake and Wordsworth contributed to a vision of childhood as a time of joy and wonder, the 'seed-time of the soul' (Archard 1993:

39), while the Victorian era brought a more sentimental image of childhood.

In an intriguing discussion, Sommerville observes how Victorian authors were prone to 'killing off' children in literature to avoid the demise of their innocence. Hence he writes:

And so, to protect this vision of innocence from corruption, the child characters were killed and their purity embalmed. Authors could not think how to picture the transition from innocence to maturity without introducing the forbidden interests which dominated the adult world. Real children would have been too frightening for these authors or their public. For real children would have reminded them of the impulses they had helped to repress in themselves. It would have raised anew their guilt at those desires and reminded them of their own part in suppressing them. In short, it was too painful to face the fact that they had helped to murder the child within them. They preferred to think that society alone was responsible, and that they had been innocent of all offense when it happened (Sommerville 1982: 172).

As Mills and Mills note, "contact with the world would bring death of a different kind" (Mills & Mills 2000: 14): the death of innocence, and, therefore, childhood itself. This perception – that childhood is innocence – is reflected in contemporary literature that laments the 'death' of childhood with titles such as *The Death of Innocence* (Janus 1981) and *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman 1982). Postman, for example, claims that childhood is disappearing through the availability of adult information through the media and that children

“in having access to the previously hidden fruit of adult information, [they] are expelled from the garden of childhood” (Postman 1982: 97).

The ‘proper child’ was (and still is) seen to be innocent and vulnerable, unworldly and in need of adult protection. Such a conception has ramifications for the role of parents and educators who are charged with the responsibility of protecting the innocent child from the ugliness and violence that surrounds them (James et al 1998: 14). This notion was codified in Britain and Australia during the period from 1890 to 1930 through the introduction of numerous laws on issues such as custody, employment of minors, neglect and protection, child vagrancy, guardianship and education, and truancy (Burns & Goodnow 1979: 49), and continues to dominate contemporary discourses on children and childhood. In her discussion of the ‘child question’, Alanen demonstrates how the notion of children as “problems or victims of the adult social order, with an associated focus on welfare and social policy” (Alanen 1994: 27) takes its place directly alongside the focus on children as future adults.

In her study of the discourse surrounding sexual abuse and children, Kitlinger (1997) claims that current notions of childhood innocence can have negative ramifications. She analyses media coverage, books

and academic work on child sexual abuse to demonstrate that such abuse is often portrayed as a crime against the ideal, the fantasy of what childhood is, or should be. The quality of childhood that is 'stolen' by abuse, she argues, is innocence. The use of innocence in such a manner is problematic for Kitzinger for several reasons, two of which are relevant to our discussion here. Firstly, it stigmatises the 'knowing' child in that abuse of a child who does not fit the model of innocence is somehow less of an offence than abuse of an 'innocent' one and secondly it has the effect of keeping knowledge and power from children, thereby increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

Kitzinger's critique of childhood innocence and vulnerability demonstrates the potentially negative consequences of the way that we conceptualise children. Of course, the dominant way of seeing children, informed by developmental psychology and socialisation theory, has many positive consequences – it provides ample reasons why adults should treat children well and provide them with a good environment to grow up in. But, as Lee (2001) argues, the pervasiveness of the dominant framework can conceal the fact that in attempting to provide a full and clear picture of what 'the child' is, we may lose sight of children as individual people (Lee 2001: 44). In the following section some of the possible consequences of the dominant conceptions are briefly explored.

Possible Consequences of the Dominant Conceptions

The production of a dichotomy of adult/child?

Childhood is defined as that which lacks the capacities, skills and powers of adulthood. To be a child is to be not yet an adult (Archard 1993: 30)

As noted throughout this chapter, the developmental model positions the child as a 'work in progress'. Adulthood is presented as the end-state, the ideal, the goal, the job complete, the *teleos* (Archard 1993: 33). In Qvortrup's famous terms, adults are 'beings' while children are 'becomings' (Qvortup 1994: 4). This produces a adult/child dichotomy whereby the adult is the ideal (a being) and the child is lacking (becoming an adult). As Smart et al note¹, adults are seen as being independent, rational and competent while, in contrast, children are assigned characteristics such as dependency, irrationality and incompetency (Smart et al 2001). Lee (2001) argues that this conceptualisation of the characteristics of children shapes the way that we interpret and understand their actions:

The dominant framework carries a particular way of interpreting the things actual children do and say. As long as children can be seen... as irrational, or as ignorant of the nature of society in which they live, then the things they do and say can be interpreted as reflections of their limitations

¹ For further discussion on this topic see Archard 1993; Christensen 1998; Mayall 1994; Oakley 1994; and Thorne 1987.

rather than as expressions of their own intentions, desires or opinions (Lee 2001: 44).

Seeing children as a 'work in progress' also often forms the rationale and justification for the power that adults wield over children. Simply being adult (and, therefore, being rational, reasonable and competent) is regarded as justification in and of itself for the control that adults have over children's lives. While this is the case in varying degrees in different situations (e.g. home or school), Lee argues that the dominant framework is most evident when decisions regarding children are based on pervading assumptions on the 'true' nature of children, when adults must act as experts on children and justify their decisions (Lee 2001: 45). One good example of this is early intervention programs such as the Perry Preschool Project, which will be discussed in the next chapter. The early intervention in the lives of children and their parents is justified in terms of expert knowledge of developmental outcomes.

The marginalisation and silencing of children

While often the dominant framework can produce overtly one-dimensional understandings of children, at other times children are simply invisible, subsumed under categories such as the family or education (Alanen 1992; Qvortrup 1994; Smart et al 2001: 9). Qvortrup (1994) argues that children's exclusion or marginalisation

can occur in a number of ways, for example: through being denied access to particular environments (usually justified in terms of protection of their physical and mental wellbeing); through their absence from social reporting; and through research. Often this marginalisation is supported in terms of 'protection', however, Qvortrup argues, that, while such protection is often important, there is a risk associated with it:

There is no doubt that this concept is very often extremely relevant, but there is at the same time an inherent risk of exaggerating it and to the extent this happens it may turn into its opposite, namely a convenient tool to protect the adult world against intrusion of children (Qvortrup 1994: 21)

Mason and Steadman argue that when children *are* recognised in the social policy arena it is not as individuals in their own right but as dependents of adult family members (Mason & Steadman 1997: 31). Alanen (1992) coins the term 'familialization' to capture this process whereby children are submerged within the family unit and parents are seen to represent the views of the children within that family. Until recently, the study of children within families which seeks to gain the voice of children as individuals has been rare, leaving a gap in understanding of the lives of children in families (Smart et al 2001: 10).

Additionally, Rayner (1991) argues that children are often marginalised due to the trivialisation of their views - because children are seen to be less competent than adults their views are not taken seriously (Rayner 1991: 37). Mason and Steadman assert that due to children's competence they are believed to be dependent on adults (Mason & Steadman 1997: 33). This dependency, Qvortrup (1994) argues, is seen as part of the 'natural order' whereby "adults are seen to have a "natural right to exert power over children" (Qvortrup 1994: 5). He goes on to state that it is the unsettling of this 'natural order of things' that is central to changing the way that children are perceived:

History (also) shows that one of the problems of any liberation movement is the naturalness with which the subordinate groups are perceived. Claims for the extension of rights to new groups have always involved a challenge to 'common sense', to the 'ordinary man' or to the 'natural social order' (Qvortrup 1994: 85)

The production of over-simplified understandings of children and their lives

...normative descriptions provided by developmental psychology slip into naturalised prescriptions. These are fuelled by the appeal to biology and evolution (Burman 1994: 4)

Situating children at the 'nature' end of the nature-culture spectrum has, as we have seen throughout this chapter, enabled the formation of theories appealing to biology for justification. While (from the 1970s on) more consideration was given to the social environment in which

the child lives, Burman argues that much of the child development research does not adequately combine the relationship between the social and biological, treating the social “as if it were a layer or coating over the biological” (Burman 1994: 46).

James et al maintain that the developmental model has produced a ‘deep seated positivism and rigid empiricism’ (James et al 1998: 19) in the way that children are studied and understood. The ability to ‘measure’ children and construct graphs, statistics and tables produces ‘normal’ parameters of academic ability, behaviour and growth. Such comparisons produce what James et al term the ‘gold standard’ of the normal child against which researchers and professionals set their enquiries. Such a framework also pushes the focus on to what is common to children, rather than what is different. As illustrated in the developmental table earlier in this chapter, data on children is often presented as if it were scientific ‘fact’ and not overlaid with political and cultural values.

One example of the lack of consideration given to cultural or historical contexts is the phenomenon of ‘play’. As we have seen, and chiefly through the work of Piaget, play has come to be seen as a vital element in the development of children. Against this, a number of theorists critique the conceptualisation of play as ‘universal’ and

necessary for the 'normal' development of young children (e.g. Burman 1994; Cannella 1997; and Fler 1999). In this vein, and drawing on research from other cultures to illustrate their point, Cannella (1997) and Fler (1999) point to the fact that our conceptions of play are western constructs. By pointing to ethnographic work conducted in the rural Carolinas by Heath (1983), Cannella problematises Piaget's emphasis on sensory-motor play, play in which infants explore the world and repeat actions with objects. Heath's study describes how young children in a particular cultural community are constantly held and cuddled, leaving little opportunity for the activities that Piaget described (Cannella 1997: 125).

In an Australian context, the differences between Indigenous and western childhood play practices have been commented on by Hamilton (1981). Hamilton found that social pretend play was absent in the activities of the children at the Indigenous community he studied. Instead, the children's activities centred on exploring their environment and (especially for boys) developing physical skills. Girls would often spend time gathering food and cooking (Hamilton 1981, quoted in Fler 1998: 73). Lyn Fasoli makes similar observations of experiences of taking a mobile playgroup to isolated families in Darwin in the early 1980s. Her mission, she believed at the time, was to "bring developmentally appropriate activities, information and

support to parents and under-school-age children” (Fasoli 1999: 54). After very limited success with their brightly coloured construction toys, paint and playdough, Fasoli and her assistant accepted an invitation to go turtle hunting with a group of women and children. From then on her preconceptions were unsettled:

From this point on Mary and I shelved our preconceived notions of parent support and education, and developmentally appropriate play agenda, and learnt as much as we could from these women and others who visited the hostel. Each week we went hunting for different creatures or vegetation. We hunted goanna, long bums (a kind of shellfish), rock oysters, mangrove worms, mud crabs and so on. I have never learnt so much in such a short time. I learnt the names of things; I learnt to see the potential for food in what had been in my eyes an empty, rather monotonous landscape; I learnt to wait for someone to show me what to do; I learnt to stop asking so many questions. In short, I learnt the way the children were learning – by watching, by being patiently shown, by paying attention and by doing myself (Fasoli 1999: 57).

The way that Fasoli ‘learned to learn’ and its message for western practices is clear. This point is underlined by Burman (1994) who looks at *why* our western notions of play as universal are problematic, arguing that they perpetuate racial and ethnocentric assumptions as well as diverting attention from the actual conditions of children’s local communities (Burman 1994: 56).

The obscuring of our vision of 'real' children

The child of the dominant framework is problematic because it stands between us and actual children (Lee 2001: 44).

One of the central critiques of the dominant framework is that it enables the production of stereotypes of children which can blur our vision of 'real' children. James and Prout (1997) argue that by always seeking to understand children through the dominant developmental frame we may not be aware of situations when it may be misleading. This is exacerbated, they argue, by the fact that the normative assumptions produced by the developmental model are so established it is often difficult to see outside of them (James & Prout 1997). As demonstrated in this chapter, this model has been reinforced by over a century of research that has, through the compilation of measurements and statistics, produced a notion of the 'gold standard' (James et al 1998: 18) of the normal child. The existence of a 'normal' range of children's growth, abilities and so forth at certain ages may in itself be innocuous; however this becomes problematic when real children are evaluated against this abstraction and, when found to be lacking, are seen to be deviant (James et al 1998; Burman 1994). The myth or fiction (Burman 1994: 16) of the 'normal child' thus becomes somehow more real than the 'in the flesh' (Smart et al 2001: 8) children that they are seen to represent.

In *Making Better Children* (1993) Deborah Tyler problematises the concept of the 'normal child' in relation to educational practices and contemporary school aims which endeavour to produce a particular type of child who is rational, autonomous and 'class and gender neutral' (Tyler 1993: 36). She quotes the research of Steedman who found that:

Teachers in English social priority schools regard few of their pupils as 'ordinary' or 'normal' children, so great is the gap they experience between the behaviours and attributes of these children and their training in how children 'ought' to be (Tyler 1993: 37).

It is likely that as the body of official research on children has expanded and the idea of what constitutes 'normality' has been progressively defined and redefined, so have more actual children been excluded from these abstractions. This point is demonstrated by Armstrong (1995) in his discussion of the emergence of the ADD/ADHD phenomenon. These behaviour rating scales, he says:

implicitly ask parents and teachers to compare a potential ADD child's attention and behaviour to those of a 'normal' child. But this raises the question, what is normal behaviour? Do normal children fidget? Of course they do. Do normal children have trouble paying attention? Yes, under certain circumstances. Then exactly when does normal fidgeting turn into ADD fidgeting, and when does normal difficulty paying attention become ADD difficulty? (Armstrong 1995: 1).

Furthermore, in producing the notion of 'the child' we may be lulled into believing that we understand children and their lives. Not only

may the abstraction of 'the child' lead us to wrong conclusions about certain situations (Lee 2001: 43), it may also prevent us from exploring different aspects of children's lives. In their discussion about children and work, James et al (1998) point out how the idealised notion of childhood as a time of play and learning has made work something that children do not – and should not - do and, in turn, limited our understandings of children and work (James et al 1998: 101). They note that in mainstream sociological literature, writings about children and work are rare and when they do appear they are dominated by "agencies intent on its reduction, control or elimination" (James et al 1998: 123) with work conceptualised as exploitative and damaging to children. James et al's discussion highlights the complexity of the issue and demonstrates how issues of morality can prohibit a full understanding of what work can mean in young people's lives. For example, what does work mean to the children involved in it? Why do they do it? What effect does it have on their sense of identity and familial relationships?

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that while children may have been regarded as the 'nation's future' since Spartan times, the past century has seen the development of ideals, theories and practices which have put an intense focus on children as representing the hope for a better

society. A century of science has seen the development of a dominant teleological conception childhood as a series of stages that must be progressed through to reach the ultimate goal of adulthood. The production of 'better' children (and thereby, in theory, 'better' adults) has become a scientific endeavour whereby children can be measured, predictions made and early interventions put in place. The role of research has been central to this endeavour and it is this research that is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter Two: The Shaping Of Research On Children

The previous chapter explored dominant western conceptions of ‘the child’ and childhood and a number of their possible ramifications. It was suggested that the way in which children are raised and educated have come to be seen as crucial elements in the production of an ‘improved’ future generation and that science, in general, and the ‘psy’ sciences, in particular, have taken on the main role in providing the answers to this important task. An essential component of this scientific approach is research. Accordingly, this chapter looks at how mainstream conceptions of the child have shaped research and, in turn, the role that research plays in perpetuating dominant conceptions. It then explores some of the ramifications of this type of research and how researchers working from a sociology of childhood framework have sought to address some of these concerns.

The ‘Knowable’ Child

In the previous chapter we saw that evolutionary theory enabled humans to be seen as *improvable* and thus presented small humans as an object of study, for they were, in a sense, the raw clay with which future adults could be moulded. The way that children were reared and educated came to be seen as one of the keys to solving

societal ills and providing the blueprint for building the ideal child became the domain of the scientific expert.

The development of definitive theories concerning the rearing and educating of children required that children first be *known*. At the beginning of the twentieth century a leading childcare researcher, G. Stanley Hall, enlisted the help of mothers in the task of mapping the life of the child. In the first instance, he sent out extensive questionnaires to parents, but later encouraged mothers to study their children and take notes:

In Hall's view, the truly scientific mother did not simply raise her child, she studied it, making notes which could serve as field data for the male academic experts (Ehrenreich & English 1979: 200).

Hall's method of using mothers to record the actions of their offspring was short-lived, however – the new generation of experts came to believe that only they had the expertise to gather the correct data. Thus the observation, categorisation and charting of children and their behaviour became the domain of a series of experts including those in the discipline of psychology (Rose 1989: 145).

Psychologists came to adopt two main sites for their observations of children – institutions such as schools and hospitals and controlled sites such as the clinic or laboratory. Institutions provided the

opportunity to observe large numbers of children simultaneously in what Rose describes as a 'plane of sight' (Rose 1989: 133). Within such a plane of sight children could be compared – their similarities and differences isolated and documented. This recording of attributes and the reformulation of large groups of children into statistics, charts and graphs enabled trends to be determined and a range of 'normality' to be constructed. By removing individual children from the picture and replacing them with measurable and recordable data, science could 'know' the child. While the individual child was generally the object of study in the laboratory, the child in question was not Sally, Tom or Mary, but the '6 month infant', the '12 month infant' or the 'four year old child'. By removing the child from their normal environment and observing them at set tasks within a laboratory the complexities or randomness of children's behaviour could be minimised. In the early 1920s Arnold Gesell at the Yale Psycho-Clinic struck upon a methodology that further removed 'the child' from the reality of actual children. Gesell recorded the actions of the children he observed and produced still photographs that could be analysed in contrast with one another (Woodhead & Faulkner 2000; Rose 1989). In this way, Sally, Tom or Mary were able to reproduced as scientific phenomena: observable, measurable and calculable.

In research terms, the links between developmental psychology and the biological sciences has led to positivist methods that seek to measure and test the child subjects, both in the laboratory and in 'naturalistic' settings. The laboratory environment has provided the opportunity to create experiences for the child and then monitor their responses. Woodhead and Faulker (2000) describe a well-used example of this: the "Strange Situation" which is based on Bowlby's attachment theory. In this procedure the young child and her mother sit in a laboratory playroom, are joined by a stranger who attempts to engage with the child and then, on a signal, the mother leaves the room. The child's reaction to being left in the room with a stranger is observed and recorded "according to a well-defined set of behavioural criteria" (Rolfe 2001: 235), as is the child's reaction when the mother returns. This process is then repeated (Woodhead & Faulkner 2001: 18). Children are then classified as "securely or unsecurely attached" (Rolfe 2001: 235).

Some of the early experiments, in a supposedly 'controlled' environment, would now be disallowed on ethical grounds, but it is nevertheless worth recalling one such study performed by Watson and Rayner in 1920. This research sought to demonstrate that children's fear of animals was not innate but shaped by the environment. A 9-month-old child was initially given toy animals to play with. In the

second phase of the study, the researchers hit a steel bar above the child's head every time he or she reached for the rabbit – a loud noise that made the child cry. After repeating this several times, the sight of the rabbit was enough to upset the child and their fear was generalised to other furry objects (Watson & Rayner 1920).

The influence of the natural sciences is also evident outside the laboratory. For example, ethology, which involved detailed recording of the behaviour of animals such as chimpanzees, was adopted for the study of children and play in the 1970s (Woodhead & Faulkner 2000: 15). This technique is still evident in research such as the Rolfe and Crossley (1997) study of Australian pre-school children's play and social behaviour. Here, observation of the children's movements and events is broken down into categorised "molecular units of behaviour" which refers to movements and "molar" categories such as "aggression" or "jealousy" (Rolfe 2001: 234). The authors argue that the advantage of these methods and the data they obtain is the "objectivity, accuracy and the ease with which they could be communicated between observers" (Rolfe 2001: 234).

The assumption that children can be understood, and understood best, through the scientific study of biological and physiological processes is also demonstrated in the fact that extrapolations are

made from animal based research to children. This has not solely concentrated on physical factors (e.g. the links between certain foods and disease), but also on the conditions in childhood and the later ability to cope with stress, as illustrated by the following quote. This information was cited in the well known *Early Years Study* (Mustard & McCain 1999) in a discussion regarding the relationship between “maternal handling” and the ability to handle stress in later life:

In one study, new born rat pups were gently handled for 15 minutes a day for the first 21 days after birth (this is equivalent to the first two years of a human’s life span). Compared to non-handled rats, the handled rats developed more stress hormone receptor cells which allowed them to control through the feedback pathways, the amount of cortisol (a stress hormone) produced. The rats were therefore better able to regulate their response to stressful events. The changes in these animals were permanent and the handled rats were better able to learn and had fewer age-related cognitive impairments (Diorio et al 1997 quoted in Mustard & McCain 1999: 33).

Research that utilises the measurement of neurological responses to stress is not confined to the laboratory. Thus, for example, research measuring cortisol levels has been used to show that babies and toddlers who receive “consistent positive responses and responsive care” from their parents will develop into socially competent preschoolers (Gunner 1998). A current research project at the Gunner Laboratory of the University of Minnesota in the United States demonstrates how this type of research is being used to research such things as the social relationships of preschool children. It is

interesting to note that the same type of language, and the same kinds of assumptions regarding measurement and precision codified knowledge used in the biochemical testing of cortisol in the laboratory, are also present in the description of research on the *social* relations of the children.

To assess social support and competence, we will take pictures of each child in each preschool classroom. Each child will be invited to a room near his/her classroom to play “The Picture Game.” He/she will first be asked to identify the children in his/her class and then asked to point and sort pictures in response to questions such as with whom he/she plays at school. The session will last about 15 minutes per child.

Cortisol levels will be determined by asking the children to play “The Tasting Game.” The children will be offered a taste of Kool-Aid/Sweet Tart crystals, after which they will be asked to hold a cotton rope in their mouths to absorb saliva. This process takes about 5 minutes per class and will be performed on 5 different days each semester during the transition from playtime to snack.

Social interactions within each class will be examined by observational work using the Peer Relations Observation Inventory, wherein the experimenters will code in the classroom after the children have habituated to his or her presence. Observers will be in the classroom approximately 5-8 weeks each semester (Gunner Laboratory 2004).

The close connection between the research methods and assumptions of the natural sciences and social research conducted on children indicates that science has traditionally been regarded as the best way to ‘know’ children – not only in terms of physiological development

but also in terms of their social and emotional development. Developmental psychology, which sees children progressing through a series of necessary stages to reach adulthood, provides a link between childhood as 'cause' and adulthood as 'effect', encouraging a form of research that again mimics some of the assumptions and methods of the natural sciences.

Using science to make predictions regarding future adults

One of the objectives of the natural sciences is to make predictions through research techniques which allow laws to be generalised across populations. While child-based research cannot hope to make clean 'cause and effect' relationships between childhood conditions and adult states, it does nevertheless proceed to establish or suggest associations in the same research *gestalt*. Longitudinal studies have been influential in the identification of those 'risk factors' in childhood which 'disrupt' the developmental process and thereby potentially cause the future adult to be either less effective than they could be, or to develop disorders such as mental health problems or to become involved in antisocial activities such as criminal behaviour (e.g. Bates et al 1991; Moffitt 1990; Farrington 1995; Serbin et al 1991; Silburn & Zubrick 1996).

One recent example of a study in this genre is provided by the Western Australia Child Health Survey conducted in 1993 and 1994 (Silburn & Zubrick 1996). This study aimed to establish the nature and extent of mental health problems over a sample of over 2,700 children aged 4 – 16 years, using an ecological view of child development (Silburn & Zubrick 1996: 2). Using a particular statistical technique the researchers found that it was possible to classify 83% of children with mental health problems “solely on the knowledge of three questions: What is the child’s family type; what is the parental disciplinary style, and is there a significant level of family discord present?” (Silburn & Zubrick 1996: 7). The presumed relationship between such research and the ability to make predictions is quite clear, and indeed this is included in the study with predictions such as:

It can be seen that if the population prevalence of adverse parenting (i.e. coercive, detached, and inconsistent parenting) was reduced by 20% we could theoretically decrease the number of significant mental health problems by about 2,000 (Silburn & Zubrick 1996: 9).

Parenting styles is only one of many potential risk factors which are identified in such cause-effect type studies. The following table summarises those factors which have been linked to negative outcomes:

Table 2

Child factors	Family Factors	School Context	Life Events	Community & Cultural Factors
Prematurity Low birth weight Disability Prenatal brain damage Birth injury Low intelligence Difficult temperament Chronic illness Insecure attachment Poor problem solving Beliefs about aggression Attributions Poor social skills Low self esteem Lack of empathy Alienation Hyperactivity/ disruptive behaviour Impulsivity	<p><i>Parental characteristics:</i></p> Teenage mothers Single parents Psychiatric disorder, especially depression Substance abuse Criminality Antisocial models	School failure Normative beliefs about aggression Deviant peer group Bullying Peer rejection Poor attachment to school Inadequate behaviour management	Divorce and family break up War or natural disasters Death of a family member	Socio-economic disadvantage Population density and housing conditions Urban area Neighbourhood violence and crime Cultural norms concerning violence as acceptable response to frustration Media portrayal of violence Lack of support services Social or cultural discrimination
	<p><i>Family environment:</i></p> Family violence and disharmony Marital discord Disorganised Negative interaction/social isolation Large family size Father absence Long term parental unemployment			
	<p><i>Parenting style:</i></p> Poor supervision and monitoring of child Discipline style (harsh or inconsistent) Rejection of child Abuse Lack of warmth and affection Low involvement in child's activities neglect			

(National Crime Prevention 1999: 136)

The World Bank Group has taken this predictive stance a step further, providing on their web site a ECD (Early Childhood Development) Calculator which:

calculates the Net Present Value of a proposed or existing Early Childhood Development program. Worth is measured in the degree to which such a program increases a sample of 1,000 newborns' chances for survival; their enrollment, attendance, and performance in school; and their future earning potential (World Bank 2004).

Within the context of the World Bank Group initiative, such programs usually focus on one of four areas, namely: services to children, training teachers, educating parents or educating through the mass media (World Bank 2004).

Such calculations illustrate how, with the benefit of such research, childhood can be seen as a site of *investment*. The belief that childhood is not only formative, but also causally linked to wellbeing and safe living in adult life, promotes the calculation of a 'return on investment' for early intervention programs. In the High/Scope Perry Preschool longitudinal study conducted in the United States, for example, a monetary "return on investment" was explicitly calculated:

Adults born in poverty who participated in a high-quality, active learning preschool program at ages 3 and 4 have half as many criminal arrests, higher earnings and property wealth, and greater commitment to marriage, according to the latest findings of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study. Over participants' lifetimes, the public is receiving an

estimated \$7.16 for every dollar originally invested (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 2001).

However, as noted in the *Pathways to Prevention* report, predictions from risk factors are in fact statements of (an almost even) probability:

Although factors such as early troublesome behaviour are highly predictive of later offending, *more than 50%* of vulnerable individuals may not progress to such outcomes (National Crime Prevention 1999: 8 *emphasis added*).

Given this, research has now turned to the task of determining why some individuals appear to succeed notwithstanding the fact that their childhood was in an environment where one or more of the risk factors were present (e.g. Garmezy 1991; Howard & Dryden 1999). Such fortitude is theorised in terms of 'resilience'. These studies escape the rather strict cause/effect sequence characteristics of much of the risk factor literature. Instead of suggesting that X leads to Y, they intimate that factors A, B and C will help to *prevent* Y. In this way, they are a more open-ended genre of studies than the risk factor research, and, although not explicitly stated, undermine its assumptions (i.e. X will not necessarily lead to Y if A, B and C are present). In this respect, they are friendlier to the actualities and variabilities of children's lives. In the central teleological sense of seeing children as the foundation of adulthood, however, they remain similar.

The developmental conception of the child, whereby the child must work successfully through a series of stages, clearly *underpins* this causal type of research. However, in areas such as Early Childhood, research is conducted purely to record and understand developmental factors. This is evident in texts such as *Introducing Research to Early Childhood Students* (Lambert 2003) where, in providing an example of an observation exercise, the types of questions that the students are asked demonstrate the developmental approach (and the Piagetian influence). In one research exercise, 'Identifying 'good' play behaviours', the students are asked to observe behaviour with a view to answering questions such as:

- Is this child actively exploring and investigating ideas, expressing them symbolically and through creative mediums by
 - actively exploring ideas, or passively following others?
 - Confidently expressing ideas symbolically, and through different creative mediums?
- Is this child beginning to take an increasingly responsible role in her/his own learning by:
 - Persisting? Or giving up readily?
 - Willingly using resource material, or only if suggested by staff? (Lambert 2003: 55-56)

Indeed, in the following observation and subsequent analysis made of a 3 year old child in a nursery (which is not included in its entirety), it would appear that there is little that is not of interest to the developmental researcher:

Harry came outside carrying his snack tag (a ticket with his name on and an elastic loop to hang up in the snack area). He hung it on the handlebars of the large yellow bike and rode around outside with his tag dangling. Harry then found the large yellow trailer, which goes with the bike. Harry carefully reversed the bike and attached the trailer to the back of the bike. This took a lot of struggling and patience. A few minutes later, he disconnected the trailer and walked up the slide, sliding down on his belly. Harry ran up the slide, balancing at the top of the slope and saying “Look at me! Look at me!” He went indoors to tell his mummy something. He came out again and ran up the slide and down again carrying his snack tag, then took the tag inside (Arnold 2003: 36).

The author notes that the observations provide important clues to Harry’s “vital interests”, which can be tied back into theories and theorists of child development, for example, his interest in transporting objects, which sheds light on which schemas or patterns Harry is exploring, his wellbeing (he is seen to have a positive sense of self in that he says “Look at me” several times) and his learning style (Arnold 2003: 37). The half hour observation of Harry provides a wealth of information for the nursery staff, namely that he:

- Is involved at level 3 indoors and level 4 out of doors
- Has a high level of well-being
- Is currently exploring *‘trajectories’*, *‘transporting’* and *‘connection’*

- Is covering personal, social and emotional development (“Look at me!”), mathematical development (‘increasing length by adding trailer to bike’ and ‘using his body as a line to reach the brush’), creative development, physical development, communication, language and literacy, and knowledge and understanding of the world
- Uses his body to explore the environment
- Is making links with adults
- Is curious and uses humour (Arnold 2003: 37-38)

This information is then used to develop an action plan that will extend Harry’s learning.

While Charlesworth (2004) notes that the very nature of recording observations of children is a very selective process, she also believes that it is the observer who has an understanding of child development who will make the right selections:

From the diary record, we learn what a parent or other adult believes is important enough to write down. Thus, the information is very selective. However, an adult who understands and applies a thorough knowledge of child development to making selections can learn a great deal about what is happening with children as individuals and as a group (Charlesworth 2004: 27).

Research conducted within such a framework provides little opportunity to see children in anything but their developmental stages, accomplishments and deficits. It is this domination of a

particular conceptualisation in research that has been problematised within the sociology of childhood.

The sociology of childhood and research

Scientific discourse demands that young warm-blooded human beings are transformed into depersonalized objects of systematic inquiry, their individuality evaporated into a set of measurable independent and dependent variables, and then condensed into general laws of behaviour (Woodhead & Faulkner 2000: 12).

In the previous chapter I drew on work from the sociology of childhood to discuss some of the possible ramifications of the dominant conception of the child. These included: the production of a dichotomy of adult/child, the marginalisation and silencing of children; the production of over-simplified understandings of children and their lives; and the possible obscuring of our vision of 'real' children. The arguments outlined during that discussion are also pertinent to the issue of research on children and for similar reasons theorists working from a sociology of childhood framework take issue with the positivist research that has dominated the study of children for the past century. In particular, they posit that such research positions the child as the 'object' of research, arguing that such objectification enables the 'universal child' to replace living and breathing children, thereby enabling the complexity of children's lives to be evaded. For example, Graue and Walsh (1998) argue that the

deficiency of mainstream research on children is not so much its research techniques but the dominance of a perspective that utilises research on children in the effort to determine universal psychological laws and/or to evaluate treatment effects. In neither case is the goal to understand children, but rather to “pursue the lofty academic goals of the absolute universal law and the ultimate treatment” (Graue & Walsh 1998: 1). The goal of providing universally applicable knowledge requires that the complexity of the ‘warm-blooded’ small humans must be discarded and that they be seen solely in terms of the framework in which they are being studied. As Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) state:

For generations, aspiring developmental researchers have been exhorted to be objective, dispassionate, and adopt the technical jargon of hypothesis testing. Scientific discourse demands that young warm-blooded human beings are transformed into depersonalised objects of systematic inquiry, their individuality evaporated into a set of measurable independent and dependent variables, and then condensed into general laws of behaviour (Woodhead & Faulker 2000: 12).

The observations of Harry cited earlier in the chapter provide an illustration of this point. Harry’s actions that were deemed worthy of recording were those that related to his individual physical and psychological development – there was nothing recorded about his interactions with other children, his mood that day or any emotions that he displayed (other than ‘curiosity’ and ‘humour’). Within such a

framework there is no room for the perspectives of individual children to be heard, or the complex lived experiences of children to be studied.

In their seminal work, *Construction and Reconstructing Childhood* (2nd ed 1997), James and Prout identify what they regard as the key features of the 'new paradigm for the sociology of childhood'. The following three relate specifically to empirical research:

- Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.
- Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.
- Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research² (Prout & James 1997: 8).

The following section discusses the last two of these in more detail: the reconceptualisation of children as social actors and the use of ethnographic methods to get closer to children's worlds.

² In the preface of the 1997 second edition of this book James and Prout acknowledged that ethnography was only one of the many possible ways that children could be included in research (James & Prout 1997: xv).

Children as social actors

It is now much more common to find acknowledgement that childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture than a precursor to it; and that children should be seen as already social actors not beings in the process of becoming such (James & Prout 1997: ix).

In their discussion on approaches to childhood research, James, Jenks and Prout (1998) argue that the conceptualisation of 'the child' is framed by two questions: how childhood is constituted in society and how the child is to be understood. Within each approach a customary sociological choice needs to be made: does one emphasise childhood as *structure* or children as *agents*. Each of these, they argue, "makes some commentary on children's abilities as social actors and their status as social subjects" (James et al 1998: 172). In response to the developmental, teleological model which positions children as incompetent, the sociology of childhood has favoured the view of children as social actors in their own right. For example, Hutchby and Moran-Ellis claim that children should be seen as: "Social agents in their own right, rather than as apprentice versions of adults" (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998: 1). Here social competence is seen as: "something that children work at possessing in their own right, the display of which is an active, agentic achievement" (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998: 14), a view that challenges the developmental conception of the 'lacking' child. Thus, social competence is not a

possession, something that can be progressively accomplished through the developmental stages and finally achieved at adulthood, but rather is “something that is established in situ, for this particular here-and-now occasion” (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998: 14-16). According to this way of looking at things, the focus should be on how children negotiate their relationships, rules and roles in different social contexts. Introducing children as competent social actors does not, however, ignore the structure of their lives for, as James and Prout remind us, “childhood is a social institution that exists beyond the activity of any particular child or adult” (James & Prout 1997: 21). In its turn, valuing children *as children* rather than for the adults that they will become, prioritises their “present, lived and collective experiences” (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998: 14).

This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of children than those previously discussed and has a number of ramifications. As Smart et al (2001) argue, seeing children as social actors has revealed them as different types of actors from those traditionally associated with the ‘childhood’ role: as soldiers, workers, carers, consumers and so on (Smart et al 2001: 12). Further, rather than concentrating on what children cannot do, the focus becomes on what they *can and are doing* (Smart et al 2001: 13; Mayall 1994: 10). Under this approach, children’s views are

solicited by researchers where they would have traditionally been explored through their adult caregivers (James & Prout: 1997: 2). For example, until relatively recently children's experiences of living with domestic violence were not solicited – their experiences were treated as an 'add on' to those of their mother and she was the one who was asked how the experience had affected her children. Research that has now been undertaken with children themselves reveals that mothers often underestimated their children's knowledge of the conflict and its effects on them (e.g. Blanchard et al 1992; Mullender et al 2000; Peled 1998).

Ethnography and the sociology of childhood

Within the subdiscipline of the sociology of childhood, and also within other disciplines such as educational research, ethnographic methodologies have become more commonplace in the researching of children. Exactly what ethnography is, however, is unclear. In their book *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (1995) Hammersley and Atkinson find that there is much diversity in both the definition and practise of ethnography. They also suggest that because much of the interest in ethnography has come from a dissatisfaction with positivist methods with its proponents agreeing more on what they are resisting than what they are embracing (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 1).

Lutz stresses the difference between ethnography and ethnographic methods, arguing that true ethnography involves participant observation of a culture or society “through a complete cycle of events that regularly occur as that society interacts with its environment” (Lutz 1981: 52). While there is room for disagreement as to what this might involve in practical terms, there is consensus that ethnographic research needs to be done in a ‘natural’ setting. This ‘naturalism’ discourages the use of artificial settings and techniques such as laboratory tests or formal interviews and sees the primary source of data as the naturally occurring events that the researcher can observe (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 6). But more than this is involved. Over and above the choice of location, Matza (1964) argues that it involves “a philosophical view that remains true to the nature of the phenomenon under study” (Matza 1964: 5). This points to the origins of ethnography in anthropology where the task of the researcher is to describe different cultures rather than impose a western interpretation or imposed explanations:

The task becomes cultural description, anything more is rejected as imposing the researcher’s own arbitrary and simplistic categories on a complex reality. The centrality of meaning also has the consequence that people’s behaviour can only be understood in context (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 9).

Ethnography – or indeed any research method which makes claims to naturalism – is thus an inductive method. In other words, the

researcher needs to believe that the data will come from the observations in the field and avoid any *a priori* propositions or assumptions about the phenomenon under study (May 1993: 112).

The movement away from positivistic methods of researching children has not been limited to the sociology of childhood. Ethnography has been used broadly in educational research over the past twenty years (Anderson 1989: 250) and Woodhead and Faulkner note that qualitative research methods are now appearing more frequently in psychology textbooks (Woodhead & Faulkner 2000: 30).

This shift in academia has happened within a wider context of a reevaluation of the status and role of children internationally with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989 (Woodhead & Faulkner 2000: 10). The remainder of this chapter will look briefly at the development of the CRC and the associated shifts at a policy and practice level.

Giving children a 'voice' in policy

The CROC was developed by the United Nations in 1989 to recognise that children's rights "require special protection" and to ban "discrimination against children and [provide] for special protection and rights appropriate to minors" (CROC 1989). By April 2005, 192

countries had ratified the convention; the United States and Somalia are the only countries not to have done so. Australia ratified the convention in 1996.

In general terms, the 54 articles of the Convention: reinforce fundamental human dignity; highlight and defend the family's role in children's lives; seek respect for children – but not at the expense of the human rights or responsibilities of others; and endorse the principle of non-discrimination (UNICEF 2005).

As Sinclair Taylor (2000) notes, the CROC was a landmark legislation that, through delineating rights for children, expressed “vision and hope in terms of both their protection and *participation in society*” (Sinclair Taylor 2000: 24). This participation is addressed in Article 12 of the convention which states that:

1. State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

The period since the enactment of the convention has seen the establishment of Children's Commissioners in many of the signatory countries of the Convention and organisations have been established to provide advice to, and lobby on behalf of, children (Sinclair Taylor 2000: 24).

Within this context local authorities and voluntary organisations are seeking to find ways of consulting children and young people (Roberts 2000: 225; Stafford et al 2003). In Australia, all of the state governments have produced information on consulting children and young people and many have established programs designed to encourage the participation of children and young people on boards and committees³. For example, the West Australian government's Office for Children and Young People situates the consultation of children under a wider policy and practice framework of this government which seeks increased consultation with all citizens, including children. Accordingly they have developed several publications such as *Conversations with Children* (2004) and *Telling the Emperor* (2002). These types of publications provide advice for adults wishing to consult children and young people and for young people who wish to become involved in decision-making processes.

³ Listed on the Victorian Government website ourcommunity.com.au January 2005 .

While such moves would appear promising in terms of the participation of children and young people in research and consultative processes, as Roberts (2000) notes, there is a danger that children can become “a tool in the adult armoury, with no opportunity for genuine participation” (Roberts 2000: 225). Research conducted by Stafford et al would indicate that Robert’s concerns are valid. Stafford et al (2003) spoke with 200 Scottish children and young people between the ages of three and 18 on what they thought about consultation. Their research showed that the children and young people they spoke to were often disappointed and disillusioned with the consultation process. Some believed that it often tended to be tokenistic and that not much was achieved, stating: “There’s a lot of listening, but not much action” (Stafford et al 2003: 372). It was stressed by the authors that:

Care is needed to ensure genuinely open communication rather than seeking confirmation of what adults think or want. This means allowing children to talk about what matters to them and dismissing as trivial, children’s priority concerns (Stafford et al 2003: 372).

This is an important point which not only has relevance for the consultation of children but is also an important issue in regard to research with children and will be returned to later in the thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the dominant conception of the child has shaped research over the past century. Driven by a desire to 'know' the child, research has been dominated by positivist methodologies which enable the child to be measured, codified and translated into statistics. Such statistics can then be used to make causal predictions about the future adult, linking the conditions of childhood with future psychoses and problems. Interventions can then be implemented during childhood to obstruct these problematic pathways.

Within such research the child is positioned as the object of the research. Research is done *on* rather than *with* children and their perspectives are seldom sought. The sociology of childhood has taken issue with the domination of this type of research, arguing that children should be seen as social actors in their own right – as the subjects of research, not objects. This challenge to the traditional positivist forms of research has seen the move towards research that seeks children's perspectives, often by adopting qualitative methods which seek to observe or speak to children in natural settings. The academic push towards seeking the perspective of children has been paralleled by a similar push at a broader community level to consult children and involve them in decision making processes.

Chapter Three: Researching Children And 'Difference'

In this chapter I examine research on children in one particular area, namely the early development of racism and prejudice. While my initial research topic was concerned with children and 'difference', I soon found that while issues of identity and difference are subjects of philosophical concern, 'difference' in itself is not the subject of empirical research. Rather, researchers are interested in the development and manifestation of prejudicial attitudes and/or treatment of others on the grounds of *particular* types of difference such as gender, disability and race/ethnicity. As questions of race/ethnicity tend to dominate the literature on prejudice and difference, it was this issue that informed much of my early reading.

In discussing this material, this chapter serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides an illustration of the central points made in the previous two chapters. These relate to the desire to 'fix' social problems by understanding their development in children; the influence of notions relating to the universal, 'developmental' child and its associated positivist research techniques; and the critiques of this type of research and the alternatives to it. Second, this chapter provides a background to the empirical research that will be discussed in Part II of the thesis. It is important to note, however, that my own empirical

study did not seek to build on the theoretical frameworks of previous work on children and prejudice. Thus, my focus on research and children in this chapter is on the methodologies used rather than the theories developed.

Fixing the social problem of racism and prejudice – from the bottom up

American children can be saved from the corrosive effects of racial prejudice. These prejudices are not inevitable; they reflect the types of experiences that children are forced to have. Such prejudices can be prevented – and those already existing can be changed – by altering the social conditions under which children learn about and live with others. When human intelligence and creativity tackle the problem and bring about the necessary changes in the society, then these prejudices and their detrimental effects will be eliminated (Clarke 1963: 130)

As discussed in the previous two chapters, the period at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th saw an upsurge of interest in research on children in an attempt to understand – and hopefully solve – the roots of social problems. Various appropriations of Darwinism had provided a framework which suggested that humans were ‘improvable’ and the secret to this was often seen to lie in the way that children were reared and educated.

During the last century one of the social problems that captured the attention of social scientists, in particular social psychologists, was

the issue of racism and prejudice. The quest to understand the roots of this problem generated an enormous body of research which has informed the development of policy and practice. In the following discussion I look briefly at how, within the academic community, the judging of others by virtue of their race went from being seen as natural and/or justified to being positioned as a social problem urgently requiring a solution and, further, how children came to be the focus of much of the resultant research. The discussion draws heavily on the work of Milner (1975) and Samelson (1978).

At the beginning of the twentieth century the mistreatment of colonised peoples was often justified in terms of the natural, more civilised superiority of the white colonisers. For example, Milner points out that the 'justification' of slavery was offered in terms of the inferiority and savagery of the slaves. This perception was enshrined in law in the code of South Carolina in which 'negroes' were described as being "of barbarous, wild, savage natures" (Milner 1975: 14). Evolutionary theory and notions of the 'survival of the fittest' provided scientific justification for the claim to superiority (Milner 1975: 19). Further, this way of looking at humankind enabled the classification of humans into a typology of 'races'. People of different races were then deemed to have particular characteristics – not just physiological but also moral and intellectual (Dummett & Nicol 1990: 95).

In tracing what they describe as psychology's 'profoundly racist past', Hopkins, Reicher and Levine (1997) describe how, during the latter stages of the 19th century and in the early decades of the 20th, the view of the superiority of whites over blacks was supported by psychologists. Samelson describes how, in 1895 the *Psychological Review* reported empirical evidence of this superiority. A study of 12 whites and 11 'Africans' showed that the whites had slower reaction times than the blacks, a result that was interpreted to mean that "quickness of automatic, reflexive action was obviously a mark of primitiveness and inferiority, inversely related to intelligence (Samelson 1978: 265). By 1910 a new psychological tool, the intelligence test provided further 'proof' of white supremacy. While the intelligence test was originally designed to determine differences between individuals, some researchers used it to ascertain differences between races and as Samelson states " ... found differences – or, if they did not, insisted that further research would" (Samelson 1978: 266).

By the 1920s the race data was beginning to be challenged from outside the profession (Samelson 1978: 266) and, to a limited extent, within it. Research conducted by Floyd Allport (one of the founders of the discipline of social psychology) in 1924 remained firmly rooted

to the premise of black inferiority, noting that research had rated the intelligence of black people at between two-thirds and three-fourths of whites. Allport was one of the first social psychologists to contend that white people's treatment of blacks might not be justified (Milner 1975: 21). According to Milner, Allport's work was also influential in the discipline's shift away from seeing black's attributed inferiority as purely innate towards acknowledging the influence of social causes and therefore susceptible to change:

If 'the Negro' was more a product of his environment than his race, and his environment was a product of the white man, then it was quite clear where the responsibility for the Negro's degraded position lay. Not only was the white man vulnerable to this moral censure, but, in the context of the idea of potential equality, his *prejudice* against the Negro could now be seen as totally unfair (Milner 1975: 22).

Thus, with the scientific basis for prejudice partially undermined and discredited, prejudicial attitudes came to be seen as unjust and irrational from the mid 1920s on. Within a relatively short period of time social psychology had shifted from 'explaining' racial differences to seeking to understand attitudes about them (Hopkins et al 1997: 306). As Samelson notes, the discipline had moved from seeking to identify the *objective* mental differences between races to the subjective issue of *attitudes* of racial groups to each other (Samelson 1978: 268). The social problem of prejudice would become a cornerstone of the fledgling discipline of social psychology with

attention now focussed on the description and explanation of the problem in an attempt to contribute to a solution (Samelson 1978: 268).

A pioneer in the empirical work on racial attitudes in the 1920s was Bogardus (1928) who conducted research into immigration and race attitudes (Milner 1975). Milner summarises this work, highlighting Bogardus' argument that racial prejudices originate in personal experiences, either 'direct' (physical repulsion due to things such as appearance, habits or living environment) or 'indirect' (second-hand experiences and attitudes from sources such as friends, family or the media). The theories put forward by Bogardus provided a firm link between the prejudicial attitudes of adults and their origins in childhood:

Antipathy against the Negro is due to differences in biological appearances and forms, variations in cultural levels, and to widespread propaganda ... [it] often begins with prejudice *caught by* children from their parents (Bogardus 1928 cited in Milner 1975: 25).

This line of reasoning was taken up by Lasker in his study *Race Attitudes in Children* (1929). Lasker's study involved the collection of adult opinions on these issues, leading him to identify the central socialising role of parents in transmitting prejudicial attitudes and the role of institutions such as the school or church in perpetuating them

(Milner 1975: 26). The first research that actually targeted children on this issue was a doctoral thesis by Eugene Horowitz in 1936 which was followed up in a subsequent study by Horowitz and Horowitz in 1938. However, arguably the most influential early work in this field (due both to the methodology it employed and also to its influence on policies) was conducted by Clark and Clark in 1947 (Nesdale 2001: 58).

The Clark and Clark study, which will be discussed in more detail later, provided the basis for a submission to the United States Supreme Court in the case of *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka 1954* which ruled that segregation in public education was unconstitutional (Schuman et al 1985: 19). Both this submission and Clark's report outlined the potential damage that segregation, discrimination and prejudice could have on the personality of all children, not just minority group children. Aggression and hostility, a lowering of personal ambitions and anxiety were among the damaging effects that Clark and Clark's study had identified (Clark 1955). In Clark's view, social science could not only provide an understanding of prejudice, it could also provide advice on how to solve the problem:

Social scientists must continue to offer their skills, knowledge, insight and techniques to a society in desperate need of an effective approach to the solution of many and complex social problems. Pure, applied and action research findings must be made available to those forces in our

society which are working towards the goals consistent with scientific facts and the values of human dignity and justice (Clark 1964: 234).

The link between childhood and the development of prejudicial attitudes continued to be cemented by research that directly involved children and also research whose primary focus was adults. For example, in Adorno's (1950) studies of the 'Authoritarian Personality', attempts were made to find the origins of prejudicial attitudes in children through investigating parents' attitudes and practices concerning child rearing. Authoritarian methods of childrearing were seen to produce a personality type predisposed to prejudicial attitudes alongside other traits (Milner 1975: 29). Milner suggests, however, that during the 1950s there was a shift away from locating prejudice within the individual towards viewing it as a widespread social problem. In 1975 Milner himself saw the problem as the "almost inevitable result of the socialisation of the child within an environment in which prejudicial attitudes are commonly held" (Milner 1975: 31).

Since the first studies in the 1930s, a large volume of research has been directed to the issue of the development of ethnic and racial prejudice in children⁴ with Nesdale identifying more than 30 studies based on one technique alone (Nesdale 2001: 58). The following

⁴ See reviews by Aboud 1988; Brown 1995; Davie 1983; Nesdale 2001)

section provides an illustration of the types of methods that have been employed in this respect.

The 'Knowable' Prejudiced Child

*The idea of **measurement** of attitudes, of locating a person's sympathies and antipathies on a numerical scale of intensity, brought an atmosphere of objectivity to a very personal and subjective issue (Milner 1975: 26).*

In his review of research studies in this area, Nesdale (2001) identifies two techniques that have dominated the field: the *ethnic preference technique* and the *trait attribution technique* (Nesdale 2001: 58-62).

Ethnic Preference Technique

The methods used in the Horowitz (1936) and Clark and Clark (1947) studies have shaped generations of similar research studies on children and prejudice. Believing that young children did not have the cognitive ability to deal with the questionnaires and attitude scales used on adults, these researchers chose to use concrete examples to represent race, for example dolls or pictures (Milner 1996; Nesdale 2001). In the Clark and Clark study children aged between three and seven were presented with four dolls – two brown and two white. In order to determine racial awareness or 'racial identification' the children were asked to choose between the dolls in response to the following requests:

1. "Give me the white doll"
2. "Give me the colored doll"
3. "Give me the Negro doll" (Clark 1955: 19)

The same children were then asked a series of questions which sought to determine their ethnic preferences:

1. "Give me the doll that you like to play with" or "the doll you like the best."
2. "Give me the doll that is the nice doll".
3. "Give me the doll that looks bad".
4. "Give me the doll that is a nice color" (Clark 1955: 23).

This measuring of ethnic awareness and/or preference using dolls, photos or pictures has remained so popular that Nesdale identifies over 70 studies that have utilised some variation of it.

Trait Attribution

Again, Nesdale (2001) traces the origins of this technique back to the early work of Horowitz and Horowitz (1938). In this technique children are asked to assign positive or negative traits to one or two dolls or photos representing ethnic groups. For example a child is shown a photo of a black boy and a white boy and asked "which child is the dirty boy" or "which is the smart boy?" (Nesdale 2001: 60). Aboud argues that while this forced-choice question format shocked people into "realizing that even very young children could experience prejudice toward other groups as well as aversion toward their own",

it also had limitations in that the children could not express degrees of negativity (Aboud 1988: 9). 'Multiple-item' tests such as the 'Preschool Racial Attitude Measure' (PRAM) developed during the 1970s were seen to address the limitations of the previous methods. Aboud explains the rationale and method behind these multiple-measure tests:

The PRAM presents the child with 24 racial and 12 filler gender items. Each item describes a positive or negative quality. One item reads: 'Here are two girls. One of them is an ugly girl. People do not like her. Which is the ugly girl?' Another item is: "Here are two boys. One of them is a kind boy. Once he saw a kitten fall into a lake and he picked up the kitten to save it from drowning. Which is the kind boy?' The child is shown a picture of a Black and a White person and must decide which one fits the description. The intensity of a child's positive or negative attitude is determined by summing the number of pro-White and anti-Black choices made, or the reverse. Unfortunately because each response is a forced choice, rejection of one group is confounded with acceptance of the other (Aboud 1988: 9).

Interviews

While in-depth interviews with children have been used in exploring racial prejudice, Nesdale reports that they tended to fall out of favour after the 1960s (Nesdale 2001: 62). He attributes this to their 'well-documented' disadvantages, namely: the fact that they are time consuming and therefore do not lend themselves to large samples (and the associated issue of generalisability); the fact that interviewers had to deal with children's developing cognitive and linguistic abilities; the possibility of social desirability responses by the children

due the presence of the interviewer; as well as practical issues such as the difficulty in coding (Nesdale 2001: 62). A further discussion of interviews and other more qualitative methods will be returned to later in this section.

Theoretical influences

Nesdale (2001) identifies four major theoretical frames which have been used to account for the development of racial and ethnic prejudice in children (Nesdale 2001: 64). While their details are not particularly relevant here, one of them - Aboud's (1988) *sociocognitive theory* is useful in that it illustrates the prevalence of the developmental model discussed in the previous chapter.

This theory posits that a child's attitude towards other groups depends upon the child's developmental level at two over-lapping sequences: the *process* and the *focus of attention*. Thus, with the *process*:

The child is initially dominated by affective-perceptual processes associated with fear of the unknown and attachment to the familiar. Perceptual processes subsequently dominate, preference for the (similar) ingroup and rejection of the (different) outgroup being determined primarily by physical attributes. Thereafter, cognitive processes take ascendancy with the advent of the concrete operational stage of cognitive development around 7 years of age and, later, formal operational thinking (Nesdale 2001: 79).

The second sequence – the focus of attention – relates to the child's focus of attention from self to group to individual (Aboud 1988: 125; Nesdale 2001: 79). Aboud argues that, based on these sociocognitive developments, prejudice peaks at around seven years of age (Aboud 1988: 128).

The greater part of research exploring the development of prejudicial attitudes in children has been undertaken in North America, Canada or Europe (Targowska 2001). The generalisability of these studies to an Australian context, Targowska argues, is therefore difficult to assess (Targowska 2001: 4). While Targowska may query the reliability of importing the results of overseas studies, the methods these studies employed have certainly been transported. Thus, the limited number of Australian studies (for example Palmer 1990; Black-Gutman & Hickson 1996; Targowska 2001; and Pedersen & Walker 2000) all employ variations of the techniques described earlier, altering the questions to take account of the cultural context. Thus, Pedersen and Walker (2000) used the PRAM II instrument in their study of 'ingroup preference of Aboriginal and Anglo children'. Care was taken that this study was appropriate for Aboriginal children including factors such as sport, parental relations, sense of achievement and relatives. The children were shown twenty 'stimulus figures' – ten Aboriginal and ten Anglo figures and asked questions

such as “One of these men is really good at sport. He plays for a team on the weekend that usually wins. Which is the man who is really good at sport?” (Pedersen & Walker 2000: 187).

Such research would appear to reflect a practice which Burman (1994) argues is inherent in much research on children where the ‘social’ or cultural aspects are treated as if they were a ‘layer or coating’ over the biological models on which they rest (Burman 1994: 46). While not explicitly stated, the importation of research techniques seems to infer that the phenomenon under study (children) are homogenous while the culture they grow up in is not. To be reliable techniques such as the PRAM therefore only need to be ‘tweaked’ to reflect the local culture. This lack of recognition of the social context of the study of racism is returned to later in the chapter.

Critiques

While positivist research methods have dominated the study of children and prejudice since those first early studies, they have not been without their critics (Connolly 2001: 219). This section explores the main critiques and some of the research that has been conducted which illustrates some of the problems.

In a comprehensive review of the critiques of the ethnic preference and trait attribution techniques, Nesdale (2001) identifies the main problems that have been identified. The first of these is that the ethnic preference technique forces children to make a choice between a limited number of options. Research conducted by Katz (1976) and Brand et al (1974) indicated that the rejection of a stimulus figure (a doll or photo) may demonstrate an ingroup preference bias rather than prejudice against members of ethnic outgroups (Nesdale 2001: 61). Furthermore, by leaving skin colour as the only differentiating cue, it is argued that these techniques unrealistically enhance the salience of this category (Nesdale 2001). Troyner expresses this concern more strongly:

Quite apart from the dubious ethical and political premises of this strategy it seems almost inevitable that 'racial' and 'ethnic' characteristics will be used by children in their responses; after all, it's the only resource available to them! (Troyner 1991: 431).

Nesdale points out that this is especially problematic in view of a body of research (e.g. Boulton 1995; Goldstein et al 1979) that indicates that, in the absence of intergroup tension or conflict, race is not a salient category until children reach the age of 9 or 10. Before this age, determinants such as gender, physical disability or even cleanliness have been shown to be more important (Nesdale 2001: 61).

An incident recorded during research conducted by Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) on young children and racism illustrates the force of these concerns about focusing on skin colour as the primary indicator for preschool children. In this incident a group of children were involved in a teacher-led activity in which the children were required to choose, from a selection of photos of children of different ethnic groups, the child that looked most like them. During the exercise the following incident occurs:

One boy, Joey (3, Asian), selects a photo of a dark skinned girl wearing a red robe and announces “Here’s me!” at the top of his lungs. The teacher looks over to him and smiles, remarking, “No honey, that’s a little Black girl. Which people look like you?” Joey stares at her for a moment or two then returns to his perusal of the photos. He offers no challenge to the teacher’s decision, nor does he provide an explanation for his choice (Van Ausdale, Feagin 2001: 52).

Only one of the four children doing the activity got their selection “correct”, causing the teacher to remark to the researcher “Well, they sure don’t know much about that do they? I mean, they really can’t pick out what group they belong to. They’re way too little” (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 53).

After the group had gone on to something else, the researcher was able to get a closer look at the photos and in particular the photo that Joey had first selected and was able to understand the logic behind his decision. In the photo the dark skinned girl was wearing a deep red robe and Joey was wearing a bright red jumper – he had been using a different criteria for “same as” than the teacher who assigned the task (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 54).

In an ethnographic study conducted during the 1990s, Chin (1999) demonstrates a similar point in relation to older children. This study looked at the marketing of 'ethnically correct' Barbie type dolls that featured different skin colour and slightly different facial features than the standard Barbie. When talking with young black girls from a low socio-economic black neighbourhood, Chin discovered that the colour of a doll's plastic did not touch on the issues that were important to these girls. Take, for example, the response from this ten year old girl:

ASIA: OK. What I was saying that Barbie ... how can I say this? They make her like a stereotype. Barbie is a stereotype. When you think of Barbie you don't think of fat Barbie ... you don't think of pregnant Barbie. You never, ever think of abused Barbie (Chin 1999: 306).

Chin went on to comment:

These toys were designed and marketed specifically to reshape a territory dominated by an assumption of whiteness, but paradoxically, they have integrated the toy world while at the same time fixing racial boundaries more firmly. These boundaries are based upon racialized markers: hair type, facial features, and skin color; toymakers like Mattel assiduously avoid delving into the social issues that Natalia and Asia identified as being central to their perspective. Ethnically correct dolls do not address Natalia's and Asia's questions about abused, pregnant, fat or dope Barbies any more than their white counterparts did (Chin 1999: 306).

For the older girls like Asia, the problems of the focus on skin colour were different from those illustrated in the incident with Joey. While

Asia was clearly aware at ten years that race was an important issue in the United States, in her day to day life the issues were different, and arguably deeper, than an issue of colour.

Another important critique relates to the correspondence (or lack thereof) between the findings of such research and the choices children actually make in regard to playmates (e.g. Boulton & Smith 1993; Fishbein and Imai 1993). Troyna argues that, in light of the tenuous relationship between the attitudes expressed by children in artificial conditions and actual behaviour, the belief in the predictive powers of these studies has been misplaced (Troyna 1991: 431). Troyna (1991) also argues that these methods are problematic in that they focus primarily on how people *look*, ignoring other important forms of categorisation such as what people *do*. Further, they infer that children will make friends based primarily on group categories:

In interpreting the rationale underpinning the structure of friendship groups in multi-ethnic settings sociometrists constantly place 'race' or ethnicity in the driving seat. Their results are presented and analysed primarily in relation to these variables. In so doing, interpersonal behaviour is explained in terms of group characteristics. Put another way, the children's motivation for selecting friends is seen in relation to group categories not personal attributes. This seems a dubious, if not entirely invalid interpretation (Troyna 1991: 433)

Connolly (2001) notes that many critics in the 1980s (e.g. Billig 1985; Reicher 1986) pressed home the point that quantitative studies did

not take account of the social context in the influence of racial attitudes (Connolly 2001: 219). Such critics argue that one of the consequences of ignoring the social context has been the reification of 'race'. Thus, rather than exploring how children construct and make sense of racial categories in their day to day lives, the research takes the categories for granted (Connolly 2001: 220).

In response to this issue, a small number of researchers (e.g. Chin 1999; Connolly 1998; 2000; 2001; Denscombe et al 1986; Troyna 1991; 1992; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001) have argued for, and adopted, more qualitative methods such as ethnography and/or unstructured interviews to study children and racial attitudes in natural settings. Much of this research is conducted in schools; however, the following section examines two studies that used ethnographic methods to study racial attitudes specifically with preschool children. It is the methods that these studies used which was most relevant to my own study.

The use of qualitative methods to study prejudice

In their study of preschool children and racism, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) contend that many adults, including researchers, refuse to acknowledge that young children are capable of understanding racial terminology and using racial epithets. When

faced with evidence to the contrary, such researchers, Van Ausdale and Feagin argue, take refuge in the assumption that children are simply mimicking adult behaviour. They describe such attitudes as 'adultcentric', meaning that "adults interpret children's activities in comparison to adult conceptions of what children *should* be doing, rather than what they are *actually* doing" (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 4). Therefore behaviour that does not fit within this adult preconceived framework is either rejected or 'explained away'. In the argument surrounding their study, Van Ausdale and Feagin also supported a number of the concerns examined in Chapter One – the problem of the child being seen as deficient and the importance of seeking to understand the child's perspective.

Van Ausdale and Feagin's study employed an ethnographic approach which sought to understand the day to day lives of children directly (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 11). It was conducted in preschool settings within the United States where the researcher observed fifty-eight preschool age children. Van Ausdale, who conducted the observations for nearly a year, used an approach adapted from Mandell's (1988) 'least-adult' role where an effort is made by the researcher to downplay the adult/researcher role and to maintain a "non-sanctioning playmate-adult" position. By adopting such a position Van Ausdale believed that she would be able to develop trust

with the children and would also “ensure that her observations of their activities recorded the most natural behaviour possible” (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 45).

The study investigated issues such as the use of racial-ethnic distinctions to define self and others and in the formation of play groups, and how children learn about racial and ethnic issues. One of its key findings was that children not only quickly learn the racial-ethnic identities that surround them but that they experiment with them in interactions with other children and adults in a sophisticated manner (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 182).

Robyn Holmes is another researcher who has challenged the typically ‘contrived’ research designs that have dominated the study of racism in children. Like Van Ausdale and Feagin, she employed an ethnographic method of participant observation, this time in conjunction with informal conversations and collection of the children’s artwork (Holmes 1995: 3). Holmes’ research also focussed on American preschool children – she spent a day at each of the five kindergartens under study for an academic year. Holmes chose to use the term ‘ethnic group’ rather than ‘race’ or ‘culture’, believing that these terms were problematic:

Some researchers view race as a biological construct useful for defining and categorizing populations of a species on the basis

of differing gene frequencies. Other researchers view race as an arbitrary social and cultural construct useful for categorizing and distinguishing one group from another on the basis of some criterion – for example, skin color, language or customary behaviour.

Because of the arbitrary and imprecise nature of the existing biological and cultural definitions of race, I have abandoned this concept; it appears to have no utility. Rather, I have elected to focus on the “ethnic” group (Holmes 1995: 4).

However she also acknowledged that “these terms are constructs devised by scholars and researchers and were never once uttered by the children” (Holmes 1995: 5).

As with the Van Ausdale and Feagin study, Holmes looked at conceptions of self and others and the role of ethnicity in friendships. She also explored how the children discussed the issue of procreation and race. Her key findings, however, differed from Van Ausdale and Feagins in that she argued that the children she studied did not use race as a criterion for deciding who would be their friend (Holmes 1995: 86).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief exploration of the methodologies that have been employed in the study of racism and/or prejudice since it came to be seen as a ‘social problem’ in the 1930s. The body

of literature on this topic is considerable but my focus has not been on the theories that have been developed but on the way that the data has been collected. Reading through this literature I often found the techniques such as the ethnic preference technique where children were forced to choose hypothetical 'friends' from photos of strangers problematic. Alternative methods such as the ethnographic methods employed in the studies by Van Ausdale and Feagin and Holmes appealed to me in that they sought to understand children's social worlds in their natural setting and conceptualised children as social actors in their own right. While I would come to question some of the questions they asked and the findings they made, before beginning my empirical study their approach appeared most aligned with my own.

PART II

Introduction to Part II

As will become evident throughout Part II, the empirical component of my study altered during the course of the PhD candidature in terms of the central focus of inquiry and its ultimate role in the final thesis. What did not alter was my deep-seated interest in the lives of the children who were the participants in my study and a desire to better understand what it was like to be a three or four year old child at day care. Part II therefore serves two roles. Firstly, it provides an exploration of my empirical research in terms of the methodological and conceptual issues, and questions that were raised as a result. These issues provide the basis for the arguments in Part III of the thesis. Secondly, it stands alone to provide a glimpse into the world of children in an Australian day care centre. Throughout my fieldwork I believed it was important that this aspect was not lost, and while it is secondary to my main argument, it still serves this important role.

Chapter Four: Research, Researcher And Ethics

Introduction

This chapter falls into two main sections. The first, entitled *Methodology*, discusses those aspects of the study that were addressed before the actual empirical work began. This includes the research question, the setting and the method chosen for the study. The second section, *In the Field*, explores the issues confronted while in the field, including those relating to method, my research role and ethical considerations.

Methodology

The Research Question

My preliminary reading had been predominantly on children's prejudice in terms of race and ethnicity, and to a lesser extent, disability. However, I wished to avoid restricting my research to these concepts as it would narrow my focus. Therefore, I formulated two primary research questions that sought to identify the children's patterns of social interaction. These were:

- What patterns of inclusion and exclusion exist in the playground?
- Who gets left out and is it evident why?

By recording the patterns of inclusion and exclusion I hoped to ascertain if the same categories that were important to adults shaped the way that the children interacted or if the choices the children made in terms of playmate were influenced by different factors.

The Research Setting

The day care centre selected was one those suggested by the City of Fremantle (one of the industry partners of the project). I chose it because it seemed 'average' in terms of the children that attended, the staff and program. There were other possible centres, which I could have attended, with a larger range of cultural and physical diversity in the attending children. However, selecting such a centre (which also had staff that was more aware of such issues) would possibly have foregrounded particular patterns and practices of 'inclusion' from the outset.

Fremantle is a port city that is part of the Perth metropolitan area. According to the last census (2001), the local government area has a population of 25,199 (ABS 2001). The area has a large population of migrants from Europe (Italians and Portuguese, for example), with 30% of the population being born overseas (ABS 2001). However, the children attending the centre in which I conducted my research were mostly born in Australia of second or third generation Australian

parents. The Indigenous population in Fremantle is very low (0.1% compared with the average for Western Australia of 3.2%), with a total population recorded in 2001 of only 321 people. There were no Indigenous children at the centre.

At the Centre, the children were allocated rooms based on age group. I decided to spend approximately six months observing the class of older (3 and 4 year old) children in the 'Koalas' room. For each age group, the staff to child ratio differed in line with the Australian accreditation standard; in Koala room it was 10:1 with an upper limit of twenty children. I observed the children for approximately two hours a day several days a week during the period; between 9 – 11am when they had 'free' play outside (a more comprehensive discussion of the routine and activities of this period is included in the following chapter).

In the mornings the children would have morning tea at 9am, don hats and sunscreen and, weather permitting, play outside. During this period the carers would take turns for a tea break and then one staff member would set up inside for the children's after lunch nap. This meant that for the majority of the outdoor play period supervision was minimal, often only one carer would be watching the twenty children. While at times structured activities would be

organised for the children – for example, painting – most days equipment was provided and the children were free to play as they liked. This allowed me to observe the children in unstructured time.

The Method

In many ways, my methodology was shaped by Van Ausdale and Feagin's (2001) ethnographic research. Like them, I believed that an ethnographic methodology was the best way to actually see the children as social actors in their own setting. I also wished to keep the children at the centre of the study and to avoid *a priori* propositions and assumptions about the children I would be studying.

The 'least-adult' method adopted by Van Ausdale and Feagin (a method that was developed by Nancy Mandell (1988) in the early 1970s) also appeared to suit my general methodology. In the role of 'least adult' the researcher positions themselves simply as a playmate and does not engage in those activities that are usually aligned with being an adult – intervening in fights, telling children to be careful and so on. Mandell draws on Mead's (1938) 'philosophy of action' to defend her position that adult-child differences can be abolished within the research setting. In terms of research with children these methodological principles involve:

Minimising the social distance between adult and child by avoiding assumptions of adult superiority.

Viewing children as social actors, and treating them seriously.

Developing mutual understanding between the researcher and the children through joint action. (Mandell 1988: 436)

In retrospect, these methodological principles informed my research in an abstract and rather general manner. Nevertheless, by employing them I hoped to view the children interacting with each other in an uncensored manner. I also drew on other research techniques such as Corsaro's 'reactive strategy' (Corsaro 1985) whereby the researcher does not initiate contact but simply reacts when a child makes contact. In his study of peer relationships among young children, Corsaro made himself available in 'peer dominant' areas and waited for children to interact with him. Unless a child addressed him directly he remained silent (Corsaro 1985: 28).

I knew that writers such as Fine and Sandstrom (1988) and James, Jenks and Prout (1998) expressed doubts about the 'least-adult' role, but believed that, in principle, the role of non-authoritative friend was possible to some extent. Mandell (1988) and Van Ausdale (2001) had, by all accounts, achieved such a status and I thought that I could as well. This was not to say that I believed it would be easy. Mandell had reported that she needed to actually *teach* the children her 'least

adult' role: if a child asked her to help tie shoes, for example, she would refuse, telling the child that she was not a teacher and that they should ask a teacher for help (Mandell 1988: 442). She records that at the beginning the children protested and posits that this is an issue that reflects how adults relate to children in general, rather than an issue that is specific to the research situation:

The main reason children have difficulty in accepting an adult as nondirective stems from their lack of experience of adults as participatory, enjoyable and non-judgemental (Mandell 1988: 442).

She goes on to say that until she could demonstrate what she could offer the children (an ever available playmate) "in exchange for being accepted into peer exchanges" (Mandell 1988: 442), the children treated her as simply another uninterested adult. However, by playing on the swings or sitting on the climbers, Mandell displayed that she was not like other adults. Once she had done that, as she notes the 'children's initial responses to being taken as serious and worthy playmates were ones of joy and incredulity' (Mandell 1998: 443).

Mandell found that both the children and the teachers tested her commitment to her least adult role and the teachers would often get annoyed at her when she did not intervene if children were 'rule stretching' (Mandell 1988: 452). To test her resolve the children

would violate rules by hiding in forbidden areas or urinating outside to test her resolve. In such instances Mandell reports that she would leave the scene, but in less extreme cases she would simply tell the child to get a teacher, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

14/11/78N Crystal is dressed up in black shoes and is carrying a purse. She wanders into the lunchroom, drops her purse and puts on a plastic apron for printing. She starts to paint all over Kyle's painting and on the actual paint board. Kyle turns to me and says, "She's painting my picture". I shrugged and replied "Tell Pam (the teacher) if you want her to stop. I can't stop her. I'm not a teacher". Kyle repeated his request. I repeated my reply. Finally he went and got Pam (Mandell 1988: 452).

My primary concern during the pre-research time centred on how the children would react to me – how long would it take before I was 'accepted'? Would they eventually act as if I was not an adult so that I could see the uncensored behaviour that often adults did not see? I felt that if I was to see this uncensored behaviour – the behaviour that was not 'stage managed' for adults - that it was important that I should become accepted as an non-authoritative adult, a friend or playmate, so that the children would act as if I was simply one of them.

I also acknowledged that I could face surprise or resistance from the staff at the childcare centre. Therefore, before entering the centre I spelled out in a letter to the staff exactly what they could and could

not expect from me while I was in the centre. The letter stated that the carers were to regard me as a big kid and expect no more from me than if I was one – I could not be relied on to supervise children or to intervene in disputes and so on.

As normal practice, a condition of my fieldwork was that I gain permission from Murdoch University's Human Research and Ethics Committee. Murdoch University is guided by the Australian *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*. One of the issues for the Human Research and Ethics Committee was that consent was gained from the parents of all of the children who would take part in the study. As Morrow and Richards (1996) note, this is almost invariably the practice when researching young children where informed consent usually relates to the consent of the 'adult gate keepers'. In addition, the right of parents to be informed and make choices about their children's participation in any research, rather than the decision being taken by those with vested interests and/or established 'experts', is, of course, central. Therefore, a letter was sent home with each of the children asking parents whether they consented to the involvement of their children in the project. Carers at the centre were also asked if they would sign a consent form. On the first day at the centre I told the children that I would be playing with them and watching what they did and if that was OK with them.

In principle, this felt far from ideal – this is a far cry from ‘informed consent’ by the actual research subjects. However, in practical terms there did not appear to be any other options for this age group.

As part of my commitment to research in a naturalistic setting, I wanted to make data collection as unobtrusive as possible. To this end I purchased a small digital recorder with a clip-on microphone that I would put in a pocket. I hoped that this would allow me to make verbal notes to myself without interrupting the process of observation and also enable me to record short conversations with the children.

In The Field

Interestingly, the issues that concerned me before going into the field turned out to be relatively unimportant once I actually started the research and things that I had thought little about were pushed to the forefront. Some of these hurdles I confronted early in the research, some were a slow shift in my perception, while others emerged after the fieldwork was completed and I needed to analyse and code the material that I had collected.

On the first day at the centre I was surprised by how easily the children accepted my presence. At times I was a bit of a novelty and a

potential playmate, at others the children basically ignored me, especially if I was not doing anything interesting. Later I came to see that the appearance of new women in the centre was commonplace – carers changed rooms, volunteers helped out for a day or so, students would do placements and so on. Interestingly there was only one male employed at the centre, a man in his early twenties who drove the ‘fun bus’ (a bus that took activities for preschool children into the community), and whenever he entered the room the children would flock around him, wanting to speak to him.

The children were also used to being observed. During the outdoor play time the carer/s would position themselves so that the majority of children were within their sight. Whether it was a matter of this unstructured supervision type observation, or whether the carers were doing child assessments that required detailed observation, the children were always within an adult’s gaze. Unless the children noted that they were being directly observed, they did not noticeably respond to the presence of a watching adult.

Similarly, the staff members in the centre were quite used to students being there and within a few weeks they appeared to be quite comfortable with me observing, especially once they accepted that I was not observing or evaluating *them*.

Being there as an observer, then, was relatively easy. It was the 'least adult' role that gave trouble almost immediately. Even by the second day the difficulties had started to surface, as the following diary entry illustrates:

I find it difficult not to tell the children not to do something – if they are fighting or if one child takes something from another – they look to me to fix it. I either look away or move. Today some kids were drinking water out of the water play bin and I said “yukky water” but I didn’t tell them to stop. I think they were doing it more to see if I would say something. I chose to leave the area so that the carers would perhaps be more likely to look, or at least it made me feel better! (Author’s research diary)⁵

The difficulties escalated on day three when I was having morning tea with the children outside. A three-year-old girl, whom I shall call Clara, looked at me with big watery brown eyes and said, “I want my mummy”. I tried talking to her but when she continued crying I asked her if she wanted to play with me when we went inside. Which she did. For the rest of the day. This was the first of many such incidents where I was torn between what I felt I should do in my status as ‘researcher’ (and, moreover, ‘least adult’ researcher) and what I would normally have done outside a research situation. Surely to offer Clara support in this way went against my role as ‘least adult’? By abandoning my ‘method’ I felt that I risked placing the

⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, this dilemma was also evident in Mandell’s accounts. However, before starting the research the situations she described were not uppermost in my consciousness.

validity of my research under question. Against this, by *not* responding in an adult way to a distraught child, I undermined the ethical core of my research that sought to see children as people, not research objects.

Over the next week or so I was often confronted by similar incidents whereby I was torn between the needs of a child and my research role. Eventually my conflict was resolved by putting the philosophy of the research over and above the research process I had set myself. Over the course of the first few weeks I abandoned my rules and did not wait for a child to come up and express their unhappiness. If I saw a child crying on their own, I went up to them and asked them what was wrong. Often a cuddle or a lap to sit on was what was required. Instead of attempting to fit the reality of doing this form of research into my preconceived plan of how it *should* work, I adapted a flexible attitude whereby I wore several hats – the researcher, the carer, the playmate – that could be changed as required. Ironically, on day ten of my observations as the following journal entry shows, for one little boy at least, I was a long way from being ‘least adult’ – for him I was ‘best adult’:

Day 10: Blake also wanted to go home and kept asking me if I was going to stay all day and look after him. He said I was the best. He kept asking when I was going and when I was nearly leaving he started crying (Author’s research diary).

As I had found it extremely difficult to both 'play' *and* observe after approximately four weeks, I started to spend less time playing with the children and instead turned to sitting and observing with a clipboard. Furthermore, when playing, I was only able to observe the children with whom I was playing, which was not giving me the opportunity to ascertain more general patterns. In research terms, I was essentially changing my method from 'participant observation' to just 'observation'. Prior to doing the research, I would have thought that this would have fundamentally changed my relationship with the children. In practice, it made hardly any difference. A couple of the older girls at first asked me what I was doing, others would come and sit by me now and then to talk, others would come up to tell on someone else or to ask for help with shoes and so on. However, while the children's perception of me did not appear to alter, the transition to sitting behind the clipboard changed the way I felt towards the research. I felt that the boundaries of my role were somewhat clearer and as I was now attempting to systematically record most of what I saw, in essence, I felt more emotionally removed from the children.

For the remainder of the time in the centre I thus recorded the activities of the children – who played with whom, for how long and what they were doing. I also traced the activities of two children each day while still attempting to be aware of what the other children were

doing. I did not physically follow the children I was observing but generally observed them from afar from several spots in the play area. This meant that I only heard what they were saying to each other if they came within earshot. This level of data collection suited my research in that I was seeking trends rather than attempting to record the minutiae of the children's interactions.

Nevertheless, recording the activities of up to twenty children was always a challenge – the children seldom spent long doing any one activity or playing with the same playmate. Take, for example, the following observations of about half an hour of the two hours that I observed Emma:

- In sandpit with Rebecca and Amber – sitting slightly apart
- Jack joins them with truck
- Michael joins
- On platform near sandpit with Steven and Jordan
- Looking around for something to do
- Sitting in sandpit alone
- With Annabel behind kitchen cabinet, making something with sand on plate
- Emma & Annabel on sand underneath shade cloth
- Lying on mat under climbing frame
- Talking with Annabel
- On bike
- Michael bumps her on bike

Before and during my research I frequently encountered questions from academics on this issue of method. How was I conducting my research? What method was I using? How was I going to analyse my data? Before I started my research and during the early stages, such

issues were of prime importance in my quest to conduct valid research. I knew that when validity is called into question, it is often the method that is under scrutiny and, conversely, that when the method is considered shaky, validity will almost automatically be questioned. But, and as we have already seen, my method in fact changed quite considerably over the course of the research – I modified my stance on the ‘least adult’ role and switched from ‘participant observer’ to ‘observer’ (although these labels do not really describe what changed and what did not). I believe my methodology was more important than the role I assumed or how I recorded my data was. By methodology I refer to the philosophy that shaped my research rather than simply the method I chose to adopt. This was an insight that I gained through the process of conducting the research, but is an insight also recognised by Leena Alanen:

Choices of focus and concrete research methods vary, of course, but so do the metatheoretical and methodological commitments with which researchers have come to the field. These commitments, I would argue, are also far more significant and consequential for the understandings of childhood resulting from sociological work, than the particular topics that are studied or the research methods that are used (Alanen : 1999 : 1).

From this perspective – which is the one that I intuitively took with me to the field – the researcher and their ethical framework are central to how the research is conducted. In the remainder of this section I examine the researcher and their role in more detail, before

turning, in the next part, to the ethical framework. As I have just inferred, these two factors are in reality intrinsically intertwined, but for analytic purposes I deal with them separately.

The Researcher

At the time of conducting this study I was 36 year old mature-age student. I had returned to study at the age of thirty when my children (two boys) were, respectively, two years and five weeks old. During my undergraduate degree in sociology and politics, I had developed an interest in policy issues relating to women and children, and my honours thesis explored the issue of children's rights. My experience of empirical research up to this point had been limited to interviews and observations of adults.

At the time of the research, my own children were aged six and eight, a few years older than the children I was observing. However, when they were younger they had attended day care and I had felt the distress of them crying and holding on to my leg when I left. Did such memories impact on the emotions that I felt when I watched children crying after being dropped off at day care? Were my feelings as I watched a child sitting alone for two hours related to how I would have felt if that was one of my boys sitting there like that? I imagine they were. One thing, I learned during this project, is that one cannot

simply strip away other parts of one's persona to leave the 'researcher' in situ, observing and collecting data. Indeed, Broch-Due (1992) questions the very distinction between the researcher-as-researcher and researcher-as-person (Broch-Due: 1992). While I had dismissed the notion of the objective researcher prior to commencing the research, the ramifications of this did not become truly apparent until I was in the field.

The Legacy of the Objective Researcher

Recall the incident with Clara on the second day of my research when I needed to make a choice between staying an 'objective researcher' or becoming a 'caring adult'. My internal conflict about what I should be doing in this situation, which was repeated in similar episodes with other children, was indebted to one of the legacies which sociology has inherited from the natural sciences – the model of the objective and/or distant researcher. To be sure, much has been written, especially within feminist literature, questioning the very notion of objective research. In more general terms, Tim May (2002) puts the *anti* case neatly:

Particular ideas of neutrality, such as the maintenance of objectivity through positioning the researcher as nothing but a passive instrument of data collection, are now exposed as falsehoods that seek to mask the realities of the research process (May 2002: 2).

That being said, as my experience illustrates, the belief that the professional researcher should remain, to a certain extent, 'distant' or removed from both the research topic and those being researched still sticks. My reading suggested that others felt conflicts similar to mine. Robyn Leavitt (1998), for example, describes her internal conflict in her study of a child-care centre when she watched a child – Rory - in distress and wondered if she should intervene:

The scene with Rory was very painful for me to observe. I was paralysed by conflict. Should I have intervened at the moment I observed the caregivers ignoring Rory's distress? (Leavitt: 1998 : 64)

The notion of the objective researcher essentially involves a separation between the researchers and researched. As I have discussed, this can involve emotional distance. However, it also involves a notion of difference in *kind*: the researcher and the researched belong to two different worlds. In my research I tried to counter this by choosing a method that did not objectify the children, but saw them as small people in their own right. I sought to see things from their level, in their context – to observe this group of children as a social group - not just a social group of children. The least-adult role appeared to offer this – while the researcher could obviously not *become* a child; it perhaps went some way towards making the researcher *less* adult and hopefully less distant.

In hindsight I realise that attempting to become 'more like' the children I was studying by no means addressed all the possible elements of the legacy of this distant researcher model. Another expectation is that the researcher will remain 'outside the data', that they will not directly influence the course of events that they are studying. This, I now see, was directly reflected in Corsaro's 'reactive strategy' whereby the researcher does not initiate contact with the children, but responds if contact is made. As well as the ethical and practical difficulties inherent in this strategy, it is actually problematic at heart. Whether I intervened to stop a child taking another's favourite toy or looked away and pretended not to notice, I was still influencing the data. The children *expected* me to intervene, this is what adults in their frame of reference generally do, and if I did not, the actions that followed were not necessarily the same as if I had not been there at all.

Emotional Issues

During the planning process of my research I would meet with my advisory group to explain my approach. During these sessions, and sessions with my supervisor at the time, we often talked about 'Gaye's time in the sandpit' and how it would be fun. I certainly thought it would be interesting. However, a good deal of the time spent at the day care centre was neither fun nor interesting. There are only so

many times you can make a sand birthday cake before you feel like squashing it with your foot. Most of the days at the centre were much the same as the previous, and recording the minutiae of the children's actions, for the most part, was not particularly interesting.

The assumption that the time with the children would be fun taps into the adult idea discussed in Chapter One – that childhood is a time of fun, innocence and play. While the children did play and have fun, they also experienced a myriad of different emotions that this ideology obscures – sadness, loneliness, angst, anger and boredom. As a researcher in this environment I also experienced emotions such as these.

I also started to feel very upset about what I was seeing after about the first week of my observations. Seeing children sitting crying on their own or sitting for an hour or more sucking their thumb, or watching Joseph who could not speak English, attempting to get out of the gate when it was left open, left me angry and frustrated. On some days I would be quite upset and angry when I left the centre and I required frequent 'debriefing' sessions with my supervisor. The following dairy entries illustrate my feelings at the time:

Day 9: I came away feeling very angry today. A new girl started and she didn't get any emotional support at all. Do the carers learn not to make a fuss of children when they

are upset when they do their training? Apparently it is valid to cry if you hurt yourself but not simply because you are upset.

Day 12: I came away feeling sad and angry again today. I felt that my research was really secondary today because I spent a lot of time pacifying children (Author's research journal)

In reflecting on the question of emotions and research, I found that the emotions of the researcher are seldom included in research accounts. When they are discussed it is often away from the research report itself, in articles (for example, Harris: 1997) or in edited volumes (for example, Hobbs and May: 1994; Shaffir and Stebbins: 1991) in which researchers discuss the more personal demands they faced during fieldwork. In their discussion of the lack of research that explores the lived experiences of children in childcare, Graue and Walsh (1998) make the observation that those who do (Leavitt: 1994, Wolf and Walsh: 1998) are "discomfiting to read". Indeed they are, and one would assume that if this discomfort shows through in the researchers' accounts, a similar discomfort was experienced in recording them. However, this rarely comes through in the texts themselves. Karen Ramsay argues that this reluctance to acknowledge emotions may be "part of the legacy of the masculinist research agenda which shaped sociology" (Ramsay: 1996: 141). She is insistent, however, that emotional involvement in research cannot be avoided.

Ethical issues encountered in the research

As discussed earlier in the chapter, before starting the research I had addressed the University ethics conditions. This involved providing a police clearance, assuring the committee that my research would not harm the children and collection of parents' permission for their children to be involved in the study.

The texts discussing research ethics (for example, Masson: 2001; Morrow and Richards: 1996; and Stanley and Sieber: 1992) tend to deal with the 'big picture' moral issues and the guiding principles such as 'do no harm'. In many respects, these guidelines have clear important implications (for example, painful experiments, withholding treatment or practising deceit). Indeed, given the power imbalance between adults and children, these 'protective' type ethics may have particular implications for protecting children as research subjects from physical, psychological or emotional injury. However, my own experience suggested these 'protective' forms of ethics did not address other ethical issues that are particularly important in research on children - namely adult responsibility and issues of trust and privacy.

Adult Responsibility

When a scared child looks at you for help because another child is hurting them, or taking their toy, whilst it might fit within the non-authoritarian model to pretend not to notice, it certainly does not feel right. Watching how children in

such situations 'work it out' might make for interesting data but must be somewhat confusing for a child – especially one who is new to the big world of day care and the often increased independence that that entails (Author's research journal)

There is an important limitation in the research guidelines that attempt to ensure that research subjects do not suffer harm. While they exist to prevent the participant being harmed by an element of the research (Fine and Sandstrom: 1988: 22), they do not indicate whether this responsibility means that a researcher should intervene if a child (or any other vulnerable subject) might be harmed in some way by elements *within* his or her own setting but *outside* the research process *per se*.

During my fieldwork, I never witnessed events that involved a child in physical danger. However, as the journal entry above illustrates, this did not prevent me from feeling it was wrong *not* to intervene when I witnessed a child being unfairly treated by another. This feeling that 'I should do something', notwithstanding my 'least adult' role, was influenced by the low adult-child ratio in the centre during the 'free-time' period. As I have already noted, the ratio for the centre for this age group was 10:1, but during the outdoor play period one of the carers would be away having morning tea or getting the indoor area ready for lunch and nap time, leaving only one carer supervising the children.

Mandell (1988), in describing her experiences with the least adult role, states that in exchange for being accepted into peer exchanges, she had to demonstrate that she had something to offer – and what she had to offer was her availability as a continually available playmate (Mandell: 1988: 442, 443). However, I felt that the last thing the children needed were more ‘playmates’; what they were really missing was the attention of adults. While of course (in theory at least) it was not my responsibility to provide this, if the children asked me for help it did not feel right to refuse. After all, whilst it was my desire to minimise the differences between them and me for the sake of the research, was it fair to expect them (especially those new to the centre) to understand that *this particular adult* would not act in the same way as any other adult in the centre? As Graue and Walsh note, while research on children should not be curtailed by assumptions about child/adult relationships being problematic; “pretending that they do not exist in the hope of getting the juiciest data possible may not be the best approach either” (Graue & Walsh 1998: 79).

In her discussion of ethical conflict in classroom research, Hatch (1995) describes a similar issue. In her case, the conflict was pressed on her after the research was completed. During a presentation of

her research findings – in particular, excerpts from conversations that demonstrated the stigmatisation of a child – Lester, a teacher, asked Hatch why she had not intervened to help the child.

As I was answering, I knew I was not just throwing up a smoke screen to cover my escape. My reasons made sense within the research framework I had learned and taken as my own. What this teacher's question ultimately had done is force me to critique that research framework. Not intervening was problematic, but what frightened me was that I had never even considered such an intervention. That my way of thinking about and doing research would lead me to such a position was a troubling realization (Hatch 1995: 217).

Hatch's reflections raise an important issue in relation to research with children in that researchers must often look beyond the ethical guidelines and research framework to determine what is acceptable for *them*. This is not something that can be learned from a textbook, but rather requires researchers to continually assess their position.

Davis (1998) makes a similar point, stating that:

By associating ethical considerations with problems of gate keeping and issues of access, researchers may overlook the notion that ethical considerations depend on the researcher's ability to understand and respond to the feelings of the children who they work with (Davis: 1998: 330).

Dealing with Trust and Privacy Issues

Most male and female fieldworkers who engage in participant observation with children adopt the "friend role" ...Such a role allows the researcher to gain the children's trust and attenuates the researcher's authority that is implied inherently in the social status of grown-up. It is a role I

employ when working with children of all ages, and I believe this role is partly responsible for the ease with which I am able to gain and earn children's trust. (Holmes: 1998: 23)

A number of researchers (for example, Holmes: (1998); Mandell: (1988) and Fine and Sandstrom: (1988)) believe that adopting a friendship role with children may enable the researcher to gain access to the children's "hidden culture" (Fine and Sandstrom: 1988: 17). However, my fieldwork, and my subsequent reflections on it, has led me to conclude that adopting the role of 'friend' so as to gain better access to the world of children (especially young children) involves deeply problematic issues.

In comparing research with children and with women, Ann Oakley (1994) argues that the major issues that relate to the adult researcher-researched relationship also relate to children. Significantly, one of the ethical issues she raises is that of the "exploitation of 'pseudo friendship'" (Oakley: 1994: 26). While her discussion relates primarily to such friendships in the interview situation, a similar concern is applicable to the friendship role often adopted in ethnographic work with children. I would argue that such a position is less than honest, for the researcher is essentially *playing a role* in an attempt to gain information to which adults would not normally be privy. Bruce Jackson's (1987) framework provides a good

base from which to determine whether such a practice might be ethical:

When you're in doubt about whether an action on your part is ethical or not, a good starting place is to put yourself in the subject's position and consider how you would feel if you learned what that friendly person was really up to. If you'd be annoyed and offended that you made a sample in a study you didn't want to be part of ..., don't do those things to others. If you'd feel betrayed because things you said in confidence were made part of a public report, then don't betray confidences – or at least tell people who think they can trust you that you can't keep secrets. Hemingway once defined the good as “what you feel good after.” Think how you'll feel later – perhaps how you'll feel if you ever see that person again. If the answer is “not so good”, then don't do it (Jackson 1987: 278-279).

On this basis, one might not feel so good, if as a child, one had been misled into thinking that a friendship with an adult was there for its own sake, whereas it was actually there to serve that adult's research purposes. Furthermore, the ‘friendships’ whereby the adult researcher plays down their adult status (such as the least-adult role) to earn the trust of children, can never be equal in that the researcher has chosen to take on the child role, whereby children cannot choose to make the equivalent role switch (Graue & Walsh: 1998: 79). For example, when I adopted the role of ‘least-adult’ I was pretending to be a child. I *chose* to drop my authority and at any time I could *choose* to reinstate it. Furthermore, if one of the children had put themselves in a dangerous situation and I had intervened, I would have expected them to obey me as an adult.

Much is written about the ethical problems of 'covert' research whereby the researcher pretends to be a member of a group without declaring themselves as a researcher (Quinn Patton 2002: 269). This almost invariably pertains to research with adult groups. But, does not pretending to be part of the group of children so that we can see their uncensored world display the same level of dishonesty or lack of respect? For example, several of the girls I was observing went to lengths to position themselves away from the gaze of the adults, myself included. One day they were sitting in a big concrete pipe at the edge of the sandpit, the opening of which was visible to all. Between the two of them they pulled a large plastic ball across the entry so that they would not be seen. At this stage I was sitting with a clipboard, well defined as a researcher. However, if I had continued to play the role of least-adult and had been able to join these girls, should I have done so? My intuition was that this basically would have been spying.

The danger of a researcher invading children's privacy is evident in the following excerpt from Corsaro's (1985) study of pre-school children peer relationships. I have quoted it at length given that the nature of Corsaro's account, as well as the actual train of events, are instructive.

The two girls, whom I will just refer to as A and B, had been playing in the outside yard. We were videotaping their play, which involved climbing up on a large wooden spool and jumping to a mat on the ground below. I was sitting near the spool holding a microphone. After several jumps to the mat, A walked behind the spool and then called out: "B, hey B! Look here!" B came around to look and I followed close behind with my microphone. When we found A, she was ducking into a small opening in the back of the spool. She then sat down inside the hollow centre of the spool. "Come on in," she said to B. B quickly joined her and, as I appeared in the opening, A said: "Not you! Go away and leave us alone." I said: "Ok, but can I leave my microphone?" B responded: "Ok, but you get out of here!" I set the microphone inside the spool and quickly left to join my assistant, who was operating the camera and monitoring the audio. I was anxious to hear what the girls were talking about, so I motioned for my assistant to let me use one half of the headset and we listened together. The first thing I heard was a banging of the microphone as A picked it up and said: "I'll talk first". She then said "you!!XX, XX,XX!! !!XX, !X!X -----!" The string of curses was 14 words long and contained some words I had heard only a few times, and two or three I had never uttered in my life. When A finished, B said: "let me talk to the dummy!" B, who seemed to be referring to me, took the microphone and said: "You !X!X, XXX!" (Corsaro 1985: 261).

After the exchange, which continued on for a few more minutes, Corsaro ponders whether the girls knew that he could hear them, and concludes that they probably could not. His analysis of the event was that the girls were producing a ritual "which symbolizes one of children's most cherished desires: *to defy and challenge adults, share the experience and not be detected*" (Corsaro: 1985: 261). But in saying this, could Corsaro have essentially missed the point? Could the girls simply have wanted him to leave them alone, but felt that in telling him to leave they could not also deny his request to leave his

microphone? It is hard to imagine a similar happening between a researcher and adult research subjects. If adults asked a researcher to leave, one would presume that the researcher would simply do so, acknowledging that those concerned wished to discuss something they did not want her to hear or simply wanted 'time out' from being observed.

Christensen and Prout (2002: 478) argue that the answer to such ethical dilemmas may lie in what they term "ethical symmetry". This framework has implications for researchers who conduct research with children. Namely, that whether the researcher is conducting research with adults or children, they employ the same ethical relationship and that the same ethical consideration is given to children as is given to adults. Using ethical symmetry as the starting point therefore requires the researcher to react to concrete situations with the children that arise during the research process, rather than attempting to develop a particular set of ethical standards that are determined before the research begins (Christensen and Prout: 2002: 482).

Concluding Reflections

Students often ask us about the “right way” to do this kind of research, and we meet much frustration when we cannot give them a recipe for the perfect study. The singular focus on methodology – on proper observation techniques, valid field notes, unbiased interview questions and reliable coding – is seductive. It allows researchers to lull themselves into thinking that they can get it right by being a technician rather than a caring person who has responsibilities to her participants (Graue & Walsh: 1998: 78).

Prior to starting the empirical component of my study, I, like Graue and Walsh’s students, had been keen to get it ‘right’. My focus on getting it ‘right’ prior to entering the field centred on issues such as methodology, the clarity and relevance of my research question, and fulfilling the ethics criteria as set out by the university guidelines. In planning the research, I was lured by the promise of a reasonably orderly process whereby I secured the research question, organised my method and site of study, collected the data and returned to my desk to analyse and write up. The reality was quite different. While I had not noticed them before entering the field, there *were* warnings in the literature. For example, James, Jenks and Prout (1998: 167) state, “research is a messy affair, as dependent on negotiation, adjustment, personal choices and serendipity as on careful and meticulous preparation”. They draw on Bulmer’s distinctions between general methodology (the general principles guiding the investigation), research strategy and research techniques, and posit that it may be

only the general methodology that remains constant in our research (James, Jenks and Prout: 1998: 167). Indeed, during my own research, the factor that remained constant and guided my decisions regarding method and ethics was my methodological principle of being true to the phenomenon that I was studying – the children – and treating them like people, not research subjects.

Central to this approach was the need to be flexible and reflexive. For a neophyte researcher of children, the decision to adapt my research to fit the reality was not easy. As Lee (2001) states, there is a level of confidence gained from adhering to established standards:

Social research is never just about concepts and facts. It is also about feelings, especially feelings of confidence. One can often try to gain confidence in oneself and one's actions by trying to live up to a socially recognized standard. The more standard one can appear, the less questionable one is and the more confident one can be (Lee: 2001: 122).

It was not until long after my empirical research was finished that I was able to regain confidence about my time in the field and could appreciate that flexibility and reflexivity had allowed me to appreciate factors about the children's social worlds that I might not otherwise have noticed. These form the topics of the following chapter.

Chapter Five: Observing The Children

Introduction

This chapter also comprises two parts: 'The children in their context' and 'Constant movement: the social world of the children'. In order to provide a context for the observations discussed later, the first section introduces the day care centre and the children who spent their days there. It also explores the routines and institutional norms that the children were expected to adhere to, and some of the possible implications of these in relation to the children's behaviour. In the second part the children's interactions are examined in more detail and how the focus of my research changed is discussed.

The Children in their Context

In traditional research on children, the context in which the child acts is irrelevant beyond its specification as a variable in a research design. Indeed, the goal is to standardize the context as much as possible, thus the popularity of laboratory or laboratory-like rooms – the contextless context. There, children are supposedly buffered from history and culture.

We propose that researchers think of children as living in specific settings, with specific experiences and life situations. We suggest that researchers spend less time attempting to develop grand theories and more time learning to portray the richness of children's lives across the many contexts in which children find themselves (Graue & Walsh: 1998: 5)

During the course of my research I increasingly came to realise how important the childcare centre was as the context of my observations.

To take the children's interactions out of the environment in which they were happening would be similar to taking a piece of jigsaw out of the larger picture and seeking to understand it on its own. The conditions of the centre: the lack of adult support, the number of children, the strict routine and how the children felt about these factors on any particular day influenced their moods and their interactions with other children and adults.

I provide my discussion of the centre, both as a means to frame the observations of the children, but also as an end in itself. As Graue and Walsh (1998) note, many children spend a great deal of their lives in child care and while debate flourishes on the quality of child care in terms of developmental opportunities, food standards and inclusiveness, few adults really have a sense of its day to day world. This section provides a glimpse into that world. While my account only describes the day care centre where I conducted my research, my observations and experiences are interspersed with accounts from one of the few people who have done ethnographic research on day care, Robyn Leavitt (1994; 1995; 1998). Leavitt spent extended time in day care in the United States and her observations indicate that some of the issues I raise may be similar across cultures and centres.

I wish to stress that my observations are not in any way intended as an evaluation or criticism of the carers. As the title of Wolf and Walsh's article (1998) stresses, "If you haven't been there, you don't know what its like". In this context, Leavitt discusses the emotional labour of working in day care centres and the demands of this kind of work. While my focus was on the children, I acknowledge that any proper understanding of the context would need to equally take the world of the caregivers into account.

Adhering to routine and institutional expectations

The standards set by the Australian National Childcare Accreditation Council identify ten 'quality areas' which include factors such as relationships between staff and children; partnerships with families; planning and evaluation; learning and development; and health and safety (National Childcare Accreditation Council 2001: 4). Each of these core areas contain a set of principles, for example, in Quality Area 5: Planning and evaluation, the following principles are identified:

Principle 5.1: Programs reflect a clear statement of centre philosophy and a related set of broad centre goals.

Principle 5.2: Records of children's learning and well-being are maintained by the centre and are used to plan programs that include experiences appropriate for each child.

Principle 5.3: Programs cater for the needs, interests and abilities of all children in ways that assist children to be successful learners.

Principle 5.4: Programs are evaluated regularly.
(National Childcare Accreditation Council 2001: 4)

Meeting such criteria and attending to the daily care of up to twenty small people each day requires a high level of organisation, resulting in a rather strict routine. Children joining the centre are required to learn that it is this routine, not their own inclinations, that determines when they may eat, drink, go inside or outside, or paint a picture.

My observations at the centre were between 9am and approximately 11.45am. I therefore did not observe the early morning routine (the centre opened at 7am), or what happened in the afternoon. The majority of the children I observed arrived from approximately 8.30am onwards. The morning routine consisted of the following activities:

9.00am: Morning tea time.

The children would go and wash their hands and sit at the table in the undercover area outside. Children could then help themselves to the plates of food on the table – fruit or toast, for example - in an orderly fashion while sitting quietly at the table. When finished they could go and wash their hands.

The children were then required to sit on the mat inside. The carers would say good morning and the children would be required to say hello back. If there were 'new friends' (new children) at the centre they would be introduced. The children were not required to say good morning to new small friends, only to adult visitors.

The carers would then lead the children in a song or read a book while the other children were still arriving. The children were to sit quietly on the mat and not talk or be silly with other children – if they did they would often be moved to another part of the mat.

It was then time to go outside.

The carers would bring out the tube of sunscreen and the children were required to put up their hands to get some squirted on and they would then apply it to their face.

Shoes were then to be taken off (it was summer during my observations). If a child was wearing sandals with Velcro they were to join them together by their straps.

When the carer gave permission, a group of children would put their shoes in the shoe box, put their hat on and go outside (there was usually a system to this – all those with a yellow t-shirt can go, all those with red on their shorts, and so on).

9.45 – 11.30am

Outside play time (if it was raining this period was moved inside; however, this only happened once during my observations).

Equipment was taken out of the shed – bikes, climbing frames, mats etc - for the children to play on, which met the requirements of developmentally appropriate play.

The children were not allowed inside during this time other than to go to the toilet.

There were numerous activities that the children could do during the outside play period on a day-to-day basis. These involved playing on the available equipment either by themselves or with others, or simply playing in groups. Thus, they might play in the sandpit, ride bikes around the bike track, play on the climbing frames, jump off

climbing equipment on to mats, play 'chasey' or play pretend games such as 'families' or 'going to the zoo'. There were also such things as toy animals and blocks provided in the undercover area.

At times special activities such as painting were organised and children were given a turn to paint at one of the two easels provided. Such activities were always greeted with great enthusiasm, but to be allowed a turn the children had to wait patiently, as illustrated by the following diary entry:

Day 21: There is a new activity organized today. Susan (carer) is tracing around the children's bodies and then the children draw on them. You have to sit quietly and wait and not shout out or you won't get a turn.

11.30am Story time.

The children were called to sit on the mat while a carer read them a story while lunch was prepared. As with the other times where the children were required to sit on the mat it was necessary for them to sit quietly unless they were asked a question by the carer.

In the centre, children's lack of adherence to the procedures was often met with impatience by the staff, as illustrated by the following

instance describing Phoebe and her drink. For health reasons, the children each had a bottle assigned to them with their name written on the side. When the children went outside to play these bottles were filled with water and placed on a tray near the door outside.

Day 18: Phoebe tells me that she is thirsty. I tell her to go and get a drink. "I don't have a bottle" (the children all have a bottle with their name on it). She goes off, then when Karen (carer) reappears she says again: "I'm thirsty". Bec replies: "I just told you to wait till I had the water bottles, now go and play or you won't be having anything".

A similar level of control was required during activities such as listening to a story (do not interfere with others, do not sit too close to others, sit quietly); music sessions (play your instrument when it is your turn); or when waiting to do a special activity.

The high level of organisation and regimentation required to look after twenty children was especially apparent during special events and outings. Just before Easter an outing into town was planned to buy Easter eggs and hotcross buns. Such an outing required the written consent of all the children's parents; enough adults were required to attend so that the ratio was one adult to four children; care needed to be arranged for those who could not go, and so forth. In the following diary entry I describe the outing and the children's reactions:

Day 17: Today we took the children on an excursion to the supermarket to buy hot cross buns and Easter eggs. I was responsible for four children to begin with but Amber started crying when we went out and she had to be taken back. Lisa's mother had not signed the consent form so she was not able to go.

Each adult had to watch four children – two children would hold the carer's hands and then the other two children would hold their hands.

The children had seemed pretty unaffected by the coming event – some mentioned it but otherwise did not seem excited about it. Some got in trouble because they had taken their shoes off again so time was wasted putting them on before we could set off.

When we got back from the outing everyone just started doing what they normally did outside. Blake said he just wanted to go home.

Did the children enjoy the break from routine? My impression was not overly. It actually seemed to upset some.

I had been surprised that the children had not looked forward more to the break from the routine, for tedium was quite often the order of the day at the centre. Indeed, many would start hanging around the outside table up to half an hour before lunch was due. Often I would sit on my little stool and wonder what it must be like to come to the same enclosure, surrounded by a wire fence, with the same people, and the same routine, day after day.

Managing emotions

As we have seen, learning the routine and structure of the centre was an important part of learning to manage at day care. While I did not know the latitude available to the children at home, I believed that the

need to fit to a firmly set routine where basic activities such as eating and drinking were determined by time of day rather than desire, must have involved a considerable adjustment for many. Another important lesson for new children was the need to manage their emotions. Leavitt (1995) describes this as one of the 'regulative norms' whereby through experience the children learn what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. She provides the following vignette to illustrate how an expectation that children should not cry unless for physical pain operates as a regulative norm in day care:

The toddlers were playing, except for Kyle (15 months) who was crying. As the toddler approached her, the caregiver knelt down, put her hands on Kyle's shoulders and said, "You must learn to smile. You're always crying. I'm not picking you up". She walked away from Kyle. He followed her and reached out to hold onto her leg. The caregiver, exasperated, said, "Will you just go away? Turn it off. I don't want to hear it". The child continued to stand there and cry (Leavitt: 1995: 11).

Similarly, during my observations, the carers did not readily accept crying for anything other than physical injury. When a child was upset by the departure of a parent they might, at times, get a hug but were generally left to 'get on with it'. It often appeared that the carers believed that if they responded to a child's emotional distress it would simply prolong the episode and teach the child to be 'dependent'. The belief that 'giving in' to a crying child was simply prolonging a

dependency that could not be tolerated in a day care environment is prominent in Leavitt's observations:

As I entered the room, Clarke (12 months) toddled over to me crying, tears streaming down his face. The caregiver was a few feet away, standing over the other five children playing on the carpet. I knelt to talk to Clarke. He reached out his arms to me, still crying. I said, "I think you need a hug", and held him. He quieted and clung to me. This was our first meeting – we were strangers. As I held Clarke, the caregiver matter-of-factly told me that he had been crying all morning. She explained that he recently had been to his grandmother's, who, she believed, "held him all the time". She suggested that this was why he wanted to be held. But, she told me, she was not going to hold Clarke. When I left for the day I put Clarke down and he began to cry vehemently again, despite my efforts to comfort him (Leavitt: 1995: 11)

Kara (4 months) was crying. She lifted her arms up to me, her eyes brimming with tears. As I reached down to her, the caregiver said to me "don't pick her up. She does that to everyone at first. We don't need to spoil her." Kara continued to cry. I hugged her briefly and then tried to interest her in a toy. She continued to cry. The caregivers ignored her (Leavitt: 1995: 12).

Leavitt (1995: 7) argues that within the day care environment the management of the children – especially their physical needs – takes precedence over their emotional needs. During my own observations this certainly appeared to be the case. Therefore, the management of emotions fell to the children themselves, as evidenced by the following account of a new child at the centre.

Justine (3 years) started at the centre when I had been there for several months. On the first few days her father would come in with

her and play for a while before leaving. Every day Justine would get very upset when she realised her father had gone and such episodes were met with frustration by the carers. On one of these occasions she was told to 'use her words': "when we are at day care we use our words". As time passed it was evident that Justine was learning the 'don't cry' rule – while she might still be distressed when her parents left, she would soon be quiet and even if she was not joining in, would sit quietly and watch. Other children such as Cory also had learned the rule. I would often find him around the corner out of the direct gaze of the carers, quietly crying and holding his bottle. Other children would sit for an hour or more at a time, quietly watching while sucking on a thumb or a blanket.

The phrase 'use your words' was one of the ways that carers operationalised the 'regulatory norm' that crying for anything other than physical pain was unwelcome at day care. The following two diary entries illustrate other ways that this message was communicated to Cory and had been internalised by Phoebe:

Day 12: When I first got there today Cory was standing with his bottle, crying. I picked him up and gave him a cuddle. After a while I got him to play in the sandpit with some others. Later when Melissa (carer) told him off for fighting with one of the other boys he started crying again. She said, "you're OK" and walked off. Later in the morning I overheard her talking to another carer about how he had been sensitive that morning and was taking any opportunity to cry and that the best way to deal with it was just to say "you're OK".

Day 1: One of the children who had just arrived was screaming and the other children sat quietly watching her. I asked one of the children why she was crying. One said she didn't know. Phoebe said it was because she didn't want her mummy to go. She went on to tell me that she didn't like being there some days but she wasn't going to cry because she had turned three.

For Leavitt's study, the issue about the management of emotions was a finding in and of itself. It was for mine too, but it also had a clear bearing on my interest in children's relations with one another. This was evidenced in two ways. First, the lack of adult support shaped how the children dealt with certain incidents. Often I would witness instances such as one child stealing another's toy. At times the injured party would go and tell a carer. However, more often than not they would simply accept the situation and get on with it. Second, when the children felt bereft, this influenced their behaviour. I soon came to dread Mondays as the children needed to 'resettle' after a weekend at home and many of them would be upset and grumpy. If they were feeling this way they would often be nasty to the other children or would refuse to play. Similarly, an event early in the morning could influence children's moods and the way they were with the other children into the rest of the day. Indeed, it was often the moods of the children that influenced if they were 'unkind' to each other, rather than any long-standing dislike. This was well illustrated

during my observations of Blake who started at the centre while I was there.

Blake was four, an only child who had never been to day care before. At first he appeared to enjoy the experience of having lots of play equipment and numerous potential play partners. He was very social, involving other children in his games and so on. However, towards the end of the second day Blake seemed to realize that a day at day care was a long time and his mood began to change – and so did his interactions with the other children. He became surly and unkind to the children he had been previously playing with and also spent more time on his own. This continued for several more weeks – often he might be quite friendly at the beginning of the day, but as the day progressed and he wanted to go home he became more reserved and sullen. By the time I had finished my study he had settled into day care and his ‘moody’ times had decreased.

The Children

Often in research on children we are provided with no more detail than their age, gender and, if relevant, their ethnicity. In this section, to help contextualise the children’s actions⁶, I introduce the children who were at the centre for the majority of the time of the study.

⁶ The children’s names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

As discussed earlier, Koalas room was for the older children of the centre – the three and four year olds – however, some of the children were just under three. The balance between boys and girls was generally quite even. While the following list includes seven boys and ten girls, on any given day the balance was relatively even.

The majority of the children attended the centre on a part time basis – only three of the children were there full time. ‘Part time’ might mean one or two days a week or, as in Joseph’s case, only the mornings every day of the week.

Sam: (3.6 years). Sam had been at the centre for several years and attended five days a week. He generally appeared quite content⁷. He was quite a social boy who, while belonging to the ‘boys group’ (which will be described later), played with a variety of children, both boys and girls.

Joseph: (3.6 years). Joseph started at the centre at about the same time I started my observations. Joseph’s mother and father were

⁷ Throughout these descriptions I use the word ‘content’ to describe children who were, at least on the surface, not demonstrably distressed or obviously unhappy during the time at the centre. However, I believe that one of the skills of ‘doing’ childcare is the ability to get on with it, even if you are not happy about being there. The children would generally not get a lot of sympathy from the carers if they showed distress when their parent’s dropped them there, so the children appeared to learn quite quickly that there was not much point crying. It is therefore not an unproblematic description but helps to distinguish the children who had obvious problems fitting in and those who did not.

recent migrants to Australia and his mother was attending English classes nearby. He was only at the centre in the mornings, four days a week. Joseph spoke no English when he arrived and was only using a few English words when I left. He often kept to himself and was often obviously unhappy being at the centre. Towards the end of my time there I often saw him put his bag on his back at about 10am and go and sit near the fence waiting for his mother who would pick him up at noon.

Cory: (3.1 years). Cory only attended the centre one day a week and had only recently come up from the room that housed the younger children. He never looked very happy when he was there and spent most of his time alone playing with a set of plastic dinosaurs. He rarely made attempts to play with the other children and if other children joined him to play with his dinosaurs he became quite possessive of his toys. He would often cry.

Lauren: (3.4 years). Lauren also spent just one day at the centre and she has Downs Syndrome. She generally seemed quite content and played on her own most of the time. She would often hold back playing on equipment until other children had left. She did not talk and it was not until her therapist came to the centre to do an

assessment that I (and, I believe, the carers) learnt that she used sign language to communicate.

Emma: (4.5 years). Emma was one of the older children and generally appeared quite content during the one day a week she spent at the centre. Emma spent the majority of her time with Annabel and they kept to themselves a great deal of the time.

Lisa: (3.1 years). Although Lisa was only three she was quite tall, so looked as if she was older. She would spend a lot of time on her own, often playing with inanimate objects or running around squealing. She was at the centre five days a week.

Amber: (3 years). Amber was also one of the group of younger children who had recently come up from the younger room. She spent two days a week at the centre and was very quiet and would often sit with her blanket just watching what was happening around her.

Michael: (3.5 years). Michael only came to the centre once a week. He was quite quiet, but was generally observed playing with one of the other boys.

Steven: (3.1 years). Although one of the younger children Steven, whose mother worked in one of the other rooms, had obviously spent quite a bit of time there. He was one of the louder boys and was often in trouble for fighting or being rough with other children.

Jordan: (4.1 years). Jordan was away on holiday for about the first six weeks of my study. However, the children would often talk about him and point to his photo which was in a collage on the wall. When he returned it appeared that he was quite popular, with the children all milling around wanting to talk to him. He was the 'leader' of the boy's group and did not spend much time with children who were not part of that group.

Rebecca: (4.1 years). Rebecca was also one of the older children and would often be the organiser of games, especially those of a role-playing nature (for example, mums and dads). She would often seek the attention of adults – the carers, me, or volunteers in the centre - sitting or standing near them and telling stories or singing.

Bridget: (4.7 years). Bridget was one of the full-time children and while generally 'content' she would at times get angry with the carers or other children and would shout and stamp her feet. She did not really form any close bonds with any of the other children, moving

from one group to the next but she and Lisa would often end up together.

Kelly: (3 years). Kelly started at the centre about half way through the study. She was frequently upset during the first few weeks of her time there and would often spend time with me. Towards the end of my observations she appeared to have settled in and was generally observed playing with one of the other girls.

Annabel: (3.11 years). Annabel spent four days a week in the centre and most of her time was spent playing with Emma if she was there. She was a quiet girl who, other than a few times when she was upset when her father dropped her off, appeared quite content when she was there.

Phoebe: (3.8 years). Phoebe was one of the more dominant children of the group. She was full-time at the centre and appeared to have been there since quite young. She liked adult attention and would spend a lot of time with new adults who came into the room – she would often get told off by the carers for showing off in front of adult volunteers and visitors. Phoebe moved through the group and played with most of the other children. She had quite a temper and would

quite often display it by shouting at other children or sulking (for example, lying on the ground and not letting anyone near her).

Joanna: (3.1 years). Joanna attended the centre one day a week. She was one of the younger children who had come up from the younger room during the early stages of my study. She was quite social compared to some of the other younger children.

Blake: (4.2 years). Blake started at the centre approximately half way through my study. He had not been to day care before and attended the centre two days a week. He was generally a social, chatty boy.

These were the core children of the group. During the accounts one or two children may be mentioned that have not been included here, as they may have started towards the end of the study or were only there intermittently.

Constant movement: the social world of the children

As discussed in the chapter on methodology, I started my empirical research with the questions: what patterns of inclusion and exclusion exist in the playground? Who gets left out and is it evident why? By asking these questions I hoped to be able to ascertain if the same

categories that were important to adults also shaped the way that the children interacted. After the first month, in an attempt to ascertain patterns of interaction, I started to track one or two children a day, recording their actions (what did they do and who did they do it with).

While this approach gave me a clear research purpose, the actual recordings left me with a lot of dense and detailed data that was difficult, if not impossible, to interpret. The following tracings of Joanna and Lisa are good examples of the kind of data collected:

Day 14: Tracing Joanna

Joanna is dropped off crying. I ask her if she wants a cuddle. She stays with me for a few minutes and then goes to play on bike
Bridget following her and bumping into back of bike
Annabel in car behind her
Looking for shoe box to put her shoes in it
Takes shoes off
Carer asks her if she wants to put on knickers because “she is a big girl”
Goes to get changed
In sandpit
Rolling blue barrel with Rebecca
In concrete tube with Emma
Sitting with Emma and Rebecca
Playing in sandpit with Annabel
Making pancakes in sandpit with Rebecca
Playing on music mat with Rebecca
Wants Rebecca to come back to sandpit
Running around grass shouting ‘oh no’ covering ears
Sitting by fence watching toddlers in next room
On swing with Emma
Follows Emma when she leaves
On bike
Looking for Jordan
Driving bike around behind Jordan saying “Jordan I hate you”
Playing with chalk on pavers

Playing with blocks
On bike
Sitting near fence with Emma
Sitting in toy car, head on hands, looking bored
Steven tells her to get out of car
On bike
Playing on the plank with Bridget
On the mat with Bridget - they appear to have had a
disagreement about something
Bridget tells her to go away
She comes to me and tells me that Bridget called her names
and she wasn't her friend
Playing in sandpit
Playing with blocks
Playing with Steven with the blocks

Day 4: Tracing Lisa

Upset when Mum left
Carer takes her for a cuddle and she calms down
On bike
Running, screaming (screaming in a high pitch squeal kind
of noise)
Has dummy, holding it
On bike, screaming
Standing on bike, hitting tree
Phoebe puts hoola hoop over her, she screams
Phoebe pulls her off bike, carer sees, Phoebe exits
Lisa crying
Sitting on plank
Playing in trolley
On climbing frame
Joanna joins her
Lisa and Joanna jump off planks
Joanna joined by Emma
Lisa leaves on bike
Playing with car
Runs, screams
Up slide, sits at top of slide
Sitting watching girls doing craft
Runs, screams
Up slide, screams
Playing with tractor
Bridget says "go away" loudly to Lisa three times
Bridget pushes Lisa, carer intervenes
In tree in sandpit

Taking shoes off to get sand out. Gets frustrated and starts crying because she can't do it. Carer helps.
Sitting on bike
Got plastic toy out of sand toy bin, puts leaves in it
On bike
Standing alone by shed playing with leaf and stick
Hoola hoop
Sitting on 'bus'
Trying to hoola
On scooter
Sitting by fence
Joins group in sandpit, shovels sand but does not interact with group
Wandering around
Running
Standing on chair
Jumps off plank onto mat
Rolling on mat
High pitch screaming
By fence under trees
Sitting on tree stump, looking into park
Chloe talking to her, Tim trying to put hoop over her
Chloe in tree, Lisa interacting
Playing in sand with shovel under trees

What could these observations tell us other than the fact that these little people seemed to do an awful lot of things and not a lot of pre-thought appeared to go into what they did? Reading through Mandell's (1988) study *after* finishing my own empirical work, it was evident that she had also grappled with this issue:

I quickly discovered that the pattern of children was one of scatter. To me, this constituted chaos. My adult conception of an orderly entry and passage from one activity to the next was of no use in guiding or ordering my attention. The following comment from my second day illustrates my difficulty in grasping this pattern of roaming:

28/4/77E It is too difficult to keep track of what happened to whom because the group disintegrated. The children flit

from one activity to another so quickly that it is difficult and confusing to find a pattern (Mandell: 1988: 448)

It often appeared that the children were just filling in the two hours of the outdoor session with whatever and whoever was available. While two of the girls and four of the boys spent most of their time together, the rest generally moved from activity to activity and playmate to playmate. Some children appeared to favour particular playmates to others, but this was in a semi-pragmatic fashion only – that is, if these favoured children were available they were the playmate of choice, but others were welcomed if they were not. The only pattern I could ascertain was that girls generally preferred to play with girls and boys with boys, but this is what I had already expected (informed by both the literature and general observations of children playing together). To make matters more difficult, the children's actions were further complicated by their prevailing mood, which could vary by the hour let alone the day, and further by the day of the week (as I have already discussed, Monday was a particularly unsettled day).

Making sense of what I was observing was thus a frustrating process – often there appeared to be no predictable patterns of interaction at all. Such frustration is illustrated by the following diary entries:

Day 6: I feel like I am not getting anywhere. I go in with a hunch – perhaps the 'boys' gang' does exclude others and that day they mix in with everyone else!

Day 7: I am getting constant confirmation that you cannot think in generalised terms with children – their lives, their personalities etc make them all react differently to different things on different days. Some of those who have been in childcare for a long time are quite social and get in there no matter how young they are – others don't. Many of the younger ones have trouble including themselves, others don't. Some of the older ones have much more noticeable 'play' skills (formulating structured role playing games etc) while others, like Bridget, don't (Author's research journal)

This observation made on day 7 was mirrored in similar diary entries throughout my time in the field. While one could always see evidence of the research on young children and play during any two hour period, there was also a lot of activity that simply did not fit the neat explanations of development or socialisation theory.

In my many attempts to write this chapter, I was frequently tempted to leave these confusing details out completely. Not only were they hard to interpret, but I also felt that they did not make for interesting reading – the blow-by-blow accounts of the movements of three and four year olds were hardly absorbing. However, I persevered as I still wanted to provide an account of what the social lives of these children were like - 'warts and all' - with all the complexities intact. In addition, as I wrote and rewrote, certain things became clearer. Initially I had presumed, as I did in the field, the transient, ever moving nature of the children's interactions had *got in the way* both of my research and my capacity to write it up. How could I ascertain

patterns if most of the children did not form permanent or even semi-permanent groupings or if, as illustrated by the diary entry earlier, they kept upsetting the hunches that I had? How could I see past the often practical, pragmatic factors that appeared to shape the children's choice of playmate to what was *really* going on? Slowly, however, I came to a realisation. In searching for patterns to the children's interactions, in looking for the deeper meaning (and wishing to discard the empirical observations because I could not find it), I was in real danger of imposing an order that did not exist.

Against this, I came to the conclusion that the children's actions and interactions *were* of a transient nature, and their interactions *were* often based on pragmatic concerns. If this was the case, then *these* were the foundations to understanding the social worlds of these young children. I had found my 'fit' and in the process realised that I had come dangerously close to reproducing the kind of mistakes described in Part One of the thesis. In research that is driven by adult perspectives and adult agendas there is a very real danger that our vision of 'real' messy, complicated children may be obscured, or even deliberately hidden, resulting in us missing important issues in children's lives.

Following this realisation, the focus of my interest also changed. It became less about issues of 'difference' and more about the gulf between the complex and unpredictable actions and interactions of the children in the study and the children presented in research accounts. I increasingly asked myself how traditional research had been able to reduce children's social lives to a level of simplicity indicated, for example, by the selection of one photo of a potential playmate over another? While I had been concerned about this type of research before I had started my empirical research, now it appeared even more troublesome.

In the remainder of this chapter I have selected certain themes in which to record my own observations and juxtapose them with some of the mainstream research and/or theory on the issue. These themes were chosen for the way that the observations discussed under them 'jarred' during my observation period. This 'jarring' often occurred because the observations did not correlate with the assumptions I had made before the research began. The themes discussed are: being with others (and on ones own) at day care; the fleeting nature of play and playmates and a discussion of 'difference'.

Rather than providing detailed logs of a number of children, the tracing logs of Joanna and Lisa reproduced earlier are referred to with

the aim of illustrating different points that require an extended time frame. In other cases, excerpts of other logs are used.

Being with others (and on one's own) at day care

Adult notions of friendship are central to our understandings of children's interactions. The very questions of inclusion/exclusion are built upon the premise of this special bond. Indeed, my own research was driven by a belief that children's 'happiness' in day care would be more influenced by having friends to play with than issues such as the nature of the food they had at lunch or whether they had to wear their shoes or not. As we saw in Part I, this assumption is shaped both by ideals of what childhood is – or should be (a time of fun, friendship and play) - and also by developmental models which position friendship as being important to a child's successful development. Further, as the following quote illustrates, young children's social interactions are generally seen in terms of their development from the 'primitive' towards the more developed, adult type interactions.

To be sure, these early peer interactions are still quite primitive. Most of the time, toddlers ignore one another's bids for interaction, and when they play together it is mostly around common toys (Bee: 1998: 196)

Against all this, during my observations I was surprised by how many children spent time on their own. At any one time during my

observations it would not be unusual for four or five children to be on their own, either involved in an activity such as playing in the sandpit or with toys or simply watching other children. While there were a group of children that spent more time alone than others, these children did not spend all of their time on their own and appeared to be able to initiate interaction if they got bored or found someone doing something that interested them.

Five of the children at the centre (Lisa, Bridget, Cory, Lauren and Joseph) regularly spent most of their time during outside play on their own. These children were often of interest to me – especially at the beginning of the research when I was attempting to determine who was being ‘excluded’ in my initial terms of reference. In the early stages of the research I had assumed that a child on their own signified exclusion, thinking that if a child was on their own it was because they were being ‘left out’, not due to their own choice. However, after observing these five children over a period of four months I came to realise that this was an oversimplification – each child spent time on their own for different reasons. A closer look at four of these children: Lauren, Lisa, Cory and Joseph, will help to illustrate this.

As already noted, Lauren has Downs Syndrome and spent just one day at the centre a week. She would spend the majority of the time on her own – at times she might position herself quite close to other children and observe them, but when others joined the activity she was doing she would leave, as the following diary entry illustrates:

Day 12: Tracing Lauren

Playing on platform near sandpit

Sitting in sandpit

Playing with kitchen bench in sandpit

Three children enter sandpit and Lauren leaves

And later:

Standing on bottom of climbing frame

Climbing up ladder – Phoebe, Sam, Jordan and Steven at

top

Waited for them to go and then carried on up

Lauren appeared quite content to play on her own – she just got on with it and played on the swings or in the sandpit. At times she would interact with others by sharing toys and so on, but on the whole the other children more or less ignored her. When the other children did interact with her it was often in a paternalistic manner, for example, I observed Susan, a new girl at the centre, patting Lauren on the back like a baby. This type of relationship seemed to be fostered by the centre staff. On several occasions I witnessed a child being told to go and get Lauren for morning tea with the instruction ‘take her by the hand and lead her’. Thus the children did not actively *exclude* Lauren, it was more that she kept herself out of their way.

Lisa was full time at the centre and during my periods of observation she also spent the majority of the time on her own. At times she would interact with others but usually only with one child at a time and this was usually Bridget. Although Lisa was at times unhappy when she was dropped off, the rest of the time she appeared to be in her own little world. At times she would run from one area to the other (often squealing), at others she would play on the equipment, ride a bike, jump off planks and so on. She would also spend a lot of time playing with inanimate objects. For example, one day I observed her pushing a stick through a leaf for approximately ten minutes. I only witnessed one incident in which she was actually 'excluded' and this was by Bridget who shouted at her to go away. One of the carers expressed concern to me one day about Lisa's behaviour and her perceived lack of social skills. Lisa, though, appeared to be quite content doing her own thing.

Joseph started at the centre at about the same time as I did and as we saw earlier, he could speak no English. Joseph also spent most of his time on his own. At times he would initiate contact – generally through the use of a common object - but he would never spend long in these interactions before going off to ride his bike or do something else on his own. When Blake started at the centre he and Joseph

would quite often play together. However, even when Joseph looked like he was enjoying himself he would often distance himself and play on his own for a while. Although I saw Steven and Phoebe being unkind to Joseph on several occasions – taking his toys or shouting at him - these two often did that to other children. Unlike Lauren, though, Joseph was obviously not happy at the centre. At times he would attempt to dash out the gate if an adult opened it and often he would sit with his pack on his back near the fence waiting for his mother who would come to collect him at 12noon.

Cory started at the centre at about the same time that I started my observations and was one of the youngest in the room. He only spent one day a week at the centre and during the time I was there he did not 'settle in'. After a couple of weeks, though, he settled into a pattern of playing with a box of plastic sea creatures or dinosaurs – predominantly on his own, but at times other children would join him. When children *did* join him he was often upset that he had to share his dinosaurs and would get into trouble with the carers for trying to bundle them all up to take them somewhere else. For him, the two hours of outside play appeared to be a matter of passing the time until he could go home again – on several occasions I observed him saying “Mummy will be back later” to anyone who cared to listen.

The other children were not excluding Cory – he simply did not make approaches to play and seemed to prefer to play alone with his toys.

The differences between these six children in terms of age, temperament, and social and language skills make it difficult to generalise about *why* they were on their own, illustrating just how hard it is to fit ‘real’ children into the schema of ‘normal’ behaviour. And it also points to something else. While developmental theory probes the social skills of the non-socialising child (for example, Putallaz and Gottman: 1981), it forgets to ask, centrally, how the child is when they are alone. Does she appear to be alone by choice? Is she content to be alone? Such questions return the focus to the here and now of the individual child rather than the ideal of the adult that they might become in the future.

Recognising that children might actually choose to play on their own was an unsettling finding for my research for, as discussed, I had assumed that the interaction between peers was going to be a primary factor in influencing children’s experience of day care. It also marked a larger conceptual dilemma whereby I felt I had to choose between acknowledging the complexity of the children’s day to day lives in all its chaos and uncertainty, or ‘filtering out’ the chaos to try and find the patterns which were more amenable to orderly research findings.

My decision to stay with the complexity inevitably makes it harder to present research 'findings' in any quick and easy way. One of the ways in which much of the research into children's worlds imposes order is through the use of 'snapshots' of the children's interactions – the interactions are decontextualised from the children's daily lives and presented as if they stand alone as illustrations of the author's point. However, a more detailed consideration of the lives of the children involved, and the contexts in which their actions take place, may well reveal a much more complex picture. This is illustrated by the following two incidents.

Day 19: Kelly and Blake climbed to the top of the climbing frame. When Connie tried to join in Kelly told her to go away and actually forced her hands off the ladder so she fell.

Day 11: Jordan is not letting Michael play with the boys group. Jordan and Sam are playing with the kitchen cabinet in the sandpit and will not let Michael open the doors etc (Author's research journal).

At first glance these two incidents appear similar: a child is being excluded from what Corsaro calls 'an ongoing peer interaction' (Corsaro: 1985) with Kelly going to some lengths to keep the 'imposter' out. What were the contexts within which these actions took place? In what sets of relationships and circumstances were they embedded?

In the first incident, the following considerations are noted. Connie was actually Kelly's stepsister and they would spend a good

proportion of their time playing together at the centre. They had also incorporated Blake into their games after he arrived at the centre. Before this incident the girls had been playing chasey with him for approximately ten minutes and then for some reason Kelly had decided that she did not want to share her 'friend'. This was not so much an 'act of exclusion' as two sisters having a disagreement over sharing their friend.

What of the second incident? Here I note that on the day it occurred Jordan had returned to the centre after a long holiday (he had not been there since I had started). My observations then, and in the days to come, suggested that he, Sam and Steven were friends who liked to play together. Crucially, though, while Sam and Steven would also play with others, including Michael, Jordan normally played with only Sam and/or Steven. During the incident quoted, Jordan appeared to be reinstating the boundaries of the 'boys group' which only included himself, Sam and Steven. On this occasion, Michael *was* indeed being excluded from 'the group' but during the next day, when Jordan was not there, I observed Sam playing with Michael.

If I had videotaped the children for an hour and observed those interactions stripped of their wider context I could have reached similar conclusions about straight exclusionary tactics. However, as

soon as the wider context to these 'snapshot' events is registered it becomes evident that two incidents which could have been read as similar acts of 'exclusion' were actually quite different. I return to the issue of 'including complexity' later in the chapter.

Playmates – a fleeting thing?

As noted earlier in the chapter, approximately one month into the research I had started to trace the activities of two children at each session. This was always more challenging than it might appear, given that the children were rarely involved in a particular activity for more than a few minutes. If I was distracted by the activities of other children, by the time my attention returned to them, the children I had been tracing might have moved on to something else – with someone else. During the course of the ninety minutes that I observed Joanna she moved 33 times (which is an average of three minutes per activity). She interacted with six children, but not the same child for extended periods, and she also spent time on her own. All of the children I traced were involved in between thirty and forty activities (Lisa, also quoted earlier, had the most 'moves' at 43) during their outside play time and would interact with up to seven children over the course of the period. However, as with Joanna and Lisa, these interactions were generally not for extended periods of time – the children would play or talk to someone, move to something else,

spend time on their own and perhaps interact with the same child later in the session.

This transient nature of the children's interactions – the constant movement from one interaction or action to the next – challenged any notion that children of this age gave the choice of their playmates a great deal of preplanning. My research question about who got included and excluded only made sense in the context of permanent or at least semipermanent groupings within or from which an individual could be included or excluded - the transient nature of children's activities ensured that this was rarely the case. Furthermore, the children's choices of 'playmates' appeared to be made primarily on practical grounds, for example, on who happened to be riding a bike around the bike track, who was in the sandpit, and even who was simply *available* (i.e. not playing with someone else). For the majority of the children, the choice of playmate was often shaped around an activity rather than vice versa⁸, as illustrated by the following excerpt from the diary entry.

Day 20: Tracing Emma
With Rebecca and Kelly in sandpit
Sitting in tyre with Rebecca
Joins group by fence bordering toddlers area
Back into sandpit
Playing totem tennis with Chloe
Play with Cory and John on block table

⁸ My observations about this type of behaviour corresponds with the psychological literature on playing (for example, Bee 1998) which speaks of interactions around common toys.

Joined by Sally
Talking to Rebecca
Emma, Rebecca and Kelly run to sandpit.

While Emma is often drawn back to play briefly with Rebecca and Kelly, she also spends time on her own or with others doing a variety of activities. Generally her primary focus appears to be on the activity and she interacts with anyone who is also involved in the same activity – for example, Chloe at the totem tennis or Sally at the block table.

This is not to say that all children played with all children in the centre – there were definitely playmates of choice if the game was one that required others – for example, chasey or a role play game such as ‘families’. Even so, if these playmates of choice were not available or willing to play, they were readily replaced with someone who was.

Furthermore, being ‘someone’s friend’ was often quite a provisional, transient status. Children could be quite happily playing together until something would happen and I would be informed that “I am not their friend”. The following account of Phoebe illustrates this:

Day 13: Tracing Phoebe

Emma, Rebecca and Chloe with buckets picking leaves off the tree

Rebecca to Phoebe: “we’re not playing with you, we’re not your friend”

Approximately 10 minutes later:

Rebecca takes Phoebe to share frozen drink in cylinder with Chloe and Emma

Thus, ten minutes after shunning Phoebe, Rebecca initiates contact with her and asked her to share a frozen drink. This was a noteworthy invitation because sharing drink bottles was not allowed, hence the girls hid in the large cylinder out of the gaze of adults to drink it.

It often required only a minor infringement for someone to lose their 'friend' status, as illustrated by the following diary entry:

Day 9: Today Steven yelled at Joseph "I hate you" and then said to me "I hate that boy". When I asked why he said "Cos he bumped into my bike".

I was also on the receiving end of this 'loss of friend' status:

Day 8: Phoebe comes up to me and tells me that I am no longer her friend
I ask why "Because you left the picnic"

Against these transient patterns, certain children did spend the majority of their time together. Those concerned were two four year old girls, Emma and Joanna, and three boys, Jordan, Steven and Sam (Emma and Joanna would generally only play with others if one of them was not at the centre; the boys would often float in and out of the group). These groupings were also noticeable because as well as spending extended amounts of time in each other's company they would also physically distance themselves from the other children.

The girls played behind objects such as the toy oven in the sandpit while the boy's group spent a good deal of time by the perimeter fence.

The children's generally pragmatic choice of playmate was cause for me to stop and reflect on two counts. Firstly, as already discussed, it highlighted how my research question did not fit the children's social interactions. This was of immediate concern in terms of the research itself (how was I going to deal with it?), but it also caused me to reflect on *why* this disjuncture had happened in the first place. For while I had been watching the children I had been quickly reminded that indeed this was what the actions of children of this age were like. Only several years previously I had spent a great deal of time with children of this age (my own and friend's children, at playgroup, kindergarten and so on). But as a researcher preparing for fieldwork it was the literature on children that I drew on and my own lived experience had been pushed to the background. The predictable children of the research literature had become my frame of reference and my memory of noisy, unpredictable children had been superseded by academic knowledge.

My second line of reflection concerned the methodologies whereby children are asked to choose between hypothetical playmates. While I had queried this before doing my fieldwork, now I began to question

its very starting point and *a priori* assumptions. A crucial point had emerged, namely that any claim that research had about informing our understanding of the development of prejudice was based on assumptions about the permanence, or at least semi-permanence, of children's attitudes revealed or 'caught' by the researcher. Against this, the ethnographic picture I was building up was all about the essentially pragmatic and transient nature of children's social lives.

Different to what?

While I had decided not to restrict my definition of 'difference' to the colour of skin or racial features, it was not until I was well into my research that I realised that I still conceptualised difference primarily in terms of physical markers. Here I included such things as the clothes children wore as well as ethnic difference. But I began to realise that the children's attention was not necessarily caught by the same factors as mine, and thus shifted my focus to what interested *them*.

Here I noted that many of the children were very observant as to what might be perceived as minor changes in people's appearance or behaviour. For example, if one of the children or adults had had a haircut it was usually instantly commented upon by a number of the children.

Day 9: When Emma arrived at the centre, Sam went over to her and said “you’ve had a haircut”. He then came over to me and told me “Emma has had a haircut.

Day 16: Three children came up to me during the course of my morning at the centre today and commented that I had had a haircut.

Day 20: One of the children’s mother came in today (she works at the centre in another room). She had dyed her hair pink and a group of children gathered around her to look and comment on it. Joanna said: “I don’t like it” (Author’s research journal).

In instances such as these the children’s attention was caught because something was new to them or, more frequently, *different from what they had seen before or come to expect*. Interestingly, the children were more likely to comment upon differences in adults (both in terms of physical appearance and behaviour) than those of other children.

Day 24: The man who drives the fun bus came through the play area today and the children gathered around to talk to him. Rebecca saw that he had an earring and she said: “men don’t wear earrings – my daddy doesn’t wear an earring (Author’s research journal).

One boy who came only once or twice while I was at the centre wore a brightly coloured cape and a hat with his hair sticking through the top. He struck me, as an adult, as being ‘different’ and I watched the children to see if they commented on his attire or treated him differently because of it. They did not. On reflection, the children’s acknowledgement of diversity in adult’s rather than children’s dress is not surprising. Children of this age often ‘dress up’ and a four year

old in a Spiderman or fairy costume out in public would not garner much interest while an adult in the same attire might.

However, the children's observations of difference were not limited to physical matters. Different behaviour was also noticed and commented on. Again, adult behaviour that differed from what the children were used to was more likely to elicit a response from the children than the behaviour of other children. For example, during my first day at the centre I was 'playing' on some of the climbing equipment (I was, after all, to be 'least adult') and my actions left some of the children looking at me bemused, as the following journal entry illustrates:

Day 1: Sat on the mat near the climbing frame. Bridget asked me to watch her run and then I had a turn. Several others then joined in. I had a turn on the climbing frame and when they said "watch me" I also said "watch me". They were slightly bemused that I was climbing on the equipment. Bridget said that it was for little people (Author's research journal).

This demarcation of what was acceptable for adults was evident on further occasions:

Day 16: Phoebe is playing monsters, putting a rubber mask on. I put on a scary face and she said I didn't have a mask on so proceeded to put one on me. After she had taken it off she muttered something about masks being for "kids, not adults" (Author's research journal).

Interestingly, what were distinguishing markers were also different from what adults might usually notice. For example, as the following

journal entry indicates, it is a carer's (Jill) red shoes that Blake uses to identify her – for him, this is her defining characteristic, not hair colour or height or even something perhaps more obvious like the colour of her shirt.

Day 23: Blake is sitting in a car, face on hand, looking bored. “Where is the lady with the red shoes?” (He was referring to Jill – a carer)

Thus, although I had sought to get away from issues such as race and ethnicity and to look for patterns of inclusion and exclusion that were shaping the children's interactions, my definition of 'difference' was still a limited one that focussed primarily on physical difference and then behavioural difference. It was only over the course of time that I came to see that children's perception of 'difference' was more fluid than that – that it was about different *from before*, *different from what I have seen before*. For many children of this age their categories of 'normal' or 'usual' are not as structured as an adults – many things are different from what they have seen before.

Concluding reflections

At the beginning of my research I had set out with two clear questions that I believed, once answered, would help to provide some insights into the types of difference that might influence young children's choice of playmate and provide a better understanding of the

children's social worlds. However, as I observed them, I realised that while I had attempted to move away from adultcentric understandings, my reconceptualisations had still occurred outside the reality of the children's immediate social lives. My main observations, partially in contrast to the ordered reality of most research texts, then came to rest on the children's pragmatism in the choice of playmates and their ephemeral patterns of action and interaction. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Mandell also commented on the children's chaos, noise and "scatter" (Mandell: 1988: 447). Her solution to the problem was to implement a "limiting strategy" in which she observed a few children at a time and concentrated on their verbal and nonverbal language (Mandell: 1988: 448). In Mandell's case, this 'limiting strategy' still allowed concentration on the details and complexity of children's lives – as, I hope, did mine. However, in much mainstream research a 'limiting strategy' is used, but not really acknowledged, whereby researchers attempt to 'find meaning' in the chaotic world of young children by simply narrowing the focus of attention. When the researcher's focus is narrowed sufficiently there may indeed be patterns that can fit back into an adult's frame of reference. Limiting strategies are a necessary and valuable tool for any researcher, but in doing it this way - in narrowing the focus to filter out the chaos – it is possible that we lose sight of important aspects of children's social worlds.

Rather than providing answers on a specific aspect of children's social interactions, my fieldwork prompted me to ask questions about research on children more generally. What, for example, were the implications of the researcher's tendency to look 'past' the chaos and complexity of young children's lives in the search for an ordered, academic pattern? In our attempt to answer adult-framed questions about the nature of difference (and other matters), do we run the risk of missing important factors about children's lives? With these questions in mind I revisited the literature on children and racism that had informed my own research.

PART III

Chapter Six: The Purpose behind the Purpose

It is not only researchers with an interest in childhood who have an interest in children. The media, business people, politicians and policy-makers all have an interest in the views, the voice or the perspective of the child.

This should, of course, be good news in principle for those concerned with listening to children and enabling them to speak out. But given this burgeoning interest in children, what is there to stop children becoming merely a tool in the adult armoury, with no opportunity for genuine participation?
(Roberts 2000: 225)

After I finished the empirical component of my project I returned to the literature on racism that had inspired me to approach my research differently, particularly the study by Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) but also that conducted by Holmes (1995). Rereading these studies with the insights that I had gained through my own observations I began to question some of the questions they had asked and some of the conclusions they had drawn. If the researchers had not been looking for signs of racism, and if they had taken into account characteristics such as the pragmatic and transient nature of young children's interactions, might they not have reached different conclusions? Why had research that had employed ethnographic methods so as to 'better' understand children resulted in children being asked questions not far removed from those studies that had employed positivist methods these authors themselves had critiqued?

In attempting to answer this question, my inquiries proceeded in two stages, both of which are reflected in the body of this chapter. In the first instance, I came to think that approaching the research from a 'social problem' approach – with racism and/or ethnicity to the fore – had 'hijacked' researchers' attempts to 'better' understand children's social lives by narrowing the focus to an adult-driven question. In essence this meant that the researchers had misused their methodology – that there was a lack of 'fit' between their social problem frame and the principles of ethnographic research that were discussed in Chapter Two (for example, being true to the phenomenon in question and avoiding *apriori* assumptions). However, on further reflection, I came to the conclusion that it was not the topic of racism nor a misused methodology that had 'hijacked' the researcher's attempts to better understand children, for 'understanding children' was never in fact their primary intention. Rather, for Holmes (1995) the intention was to gain a better understanding of children's understanding of racism; for Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) it was to better understand the development of racism in young children. That children *per se* were not at the centre of these researchers' interests, was, as I shall argue later, masked by the fact that the researchers adopted an ethnographic methodology and the language of the sociology of childhood.

This realisation led me to think more creatively and fully about what researching children with the intent of simply gaining a better understanding of the variability of their lives and experiences might look like. It also led me to consider the relationship between the intent or purpose behind the research to the methodologies employed and the type of research that was produced.

In the next section I set out these issues and arguments in more detail. Following that I consider their specific implications for the work undertaken by Van Ausdale and Feagin, Holmes and others, before moving on to consider a number of more general issues about applied social research and children's lives.

Social Problems and the 'misuse' of methodology

My starting point here is that the general sociological literature warns against taking a problem such as racism as the starting point for research (e.g. Lowry 1974; May 1993; Silverman 1993). These authors argue that it is important for sociologists to explore the values and challenge the assumptions that underpin social problems rather than simply taking a given problem as a starting point for research. Lowry points out that the failure to challenge prevailing assumptions promotes the belief social problems exist 'out there'

rather than through the way ‘scientists and laymen define, identify, investigate and attempt to resolve them’ (Lowry 1974: ix). Similarly, May (1993) stresses the importance of examining how a social problem has been constructed *as* a social problem, taking into account cultural and historical factors and issues of power while Boucher (1995) maintains that the researcher should apply the same rigour of analysis to themselves as those that they research:

For example, if she is studying race in primary education in Philadelphia, the first set of questions would be why this topic? Why study race? Why primary education? Why an urban location? She might then ask herself if anything in her racial experience influenced the choice of topic? How about experiences of one’s education or living in a city? She could then ask similar questions about the choice of research topic, theories, methods and so on. (Boucher 1995: np)

Social problems also narrow the focus of the research by limiting what social researchers seek to find out and indeed what is seen in the field. Ansoff argues that often the narrowness of the questions asked in research “precludes the results from being an interesting contribution to fundamental knowledge” (Ansoff 1986: 20). Thus, for example, Tim May’s (1993) work usefully indicates how the expectations of sponsors can lead to *selectivity* whereby potentially interesting and/or useful findings that do not fit within the predefined parameters of the research are dismissed (May 1993: 37).

Issues such as these are particularly relevant where research on children is concerned, given that social problems are conceptualised by adults in the adult world and reflect adult concerns and values. It is ironic, then, that Part One of this thesis pointed to the continued prevalence of the social problem approach in research on children, with researchers attempting to find the answer to social problems at their perceived origin – in childhood. It is even more ironic that this attempt to diagnose social problems early enough to enable intervention still lies at the heart of much research which claims to place children at the centre of the picture.

On a related level, the disjuncture between the claim (placing children at the centre through the use of ethnographic methods) and the actual way the research by Van Ausdale and Holmes was conducted (whereby children were often asked set questions and/or reduced to categories such as ‘Anna, 3 black’), reveals a fundamental mismatch between the ethnographic philosophy and the starting assumptions of research motivated by social problem research.

As discussed at the end of Part I, while there is disagreement on what exactly constitutes ethnography in terms of ‘procedural rules’ (as a ‘method’) there is agreement that ethnographic research needs to be done in a ‘natural’ setting. Brewer (2000) traces this naturalism back

to its ontological and epistemological roots where, unlike physical and inanimate objects, human beings *interpret and construct their social world*. Thus, as Brewer (2000) states, any of the particular ethnographic methods involved must track back to the philosophy and theories that underpin them as they involve researchers in “commitments whether or not they are aware of it, for they entail assumptions about the nature of society and assumptions about the nature of knowledge” (Brewer 2000: 28). These assumptions underlie the inductive nature of ethnography and principles such as the importance of being true to the phenomenon under study (Matza 1964: 5) as well as the importance of avoiding *a priori* assumptions and the “premature definition of variables” (Silverman 1993: 36). To deploy ethnography as a means of studying a taken for granted ‘social problem’ is thus to use it as a ‘method’ removed of its philosophical base⁹. In this sense, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) and Holmes’ (1995) attempts to do research that better understood children and racism has been thwarted by a ‘misused’ methodology.

This line of reasoning took me a large part of the way and remains reflected in much of the discussion later in this chapter. However, in response to the comments of a colleague who read an earlier draft of

⁹ These issues are discussed extensively by authors such as Brewer (2000) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1995).

this discussion, I realised that there was also something more at play. This related to why it was that Van Ausdale and Feagin and Holmes decided to place children 'centre stage' in the first place – to what, in other words, was the 'purpose behind their purpose'. And this, as already indicated, did not seem to be understanding children but, one way or another, about gaining a better understanding of the development of racism in children .

Thus, while Van Ausdale and Feagin had taken up the sociology of childhood challenge to the extent that they had reconceptualised 'the child' as social actor, and Holmes had set out to "convey young children's knowledge of race and ethnicity in their own terms" (Holmes 1995: 3), neither of them had the lives and experiences of individual children as their primary interest.

The distinction between 'the child' (as a category) and 'children' (actual children) is often discussed in ontological terms but it is also a central issue in the way that research with children is conceptualised and carried out. For as long as the abstract category 'the child' is to the fore, it is quite possible for researchers to use the language and methodology of the sociology of childhood while absenting the voices and views of actual *children* from the research. This concern is expressed by Roberts:

Researching children and trying to involve children and young people in decisions touching on their lives does not necessarily place researchers or others on the high moral ground, above those who in the bad old days would research children or intervene in their lives without so much as a focus group or questionnaire. It cannot be taken for granted that more listening means more hearing, or that the cost benefits to children of participating in research on questions in which they may or may not have a stake is worth the candle (Roberts 2000: 229).

Against this, the challenge that had been put forward by the sociology of childhood was to better understand the world of children by, in fact, giving primacy to the voices and perspectives of *children*. This requires a great deal from researchers who take up the challenge: they must attempt to put aside their adult understandings of the world and the issues that are important to adults and they must lay aside any notions of being 'experts' about children and accept that children know more about their social world than the researchers do. But most importantly, they are required to put the *children* before themselves as researchers or as academics. Considering the power imbalance between adults and children this is an important point, for, as Sumsion asks: "to what extent, I wonder, are we really willing to relinquish our power as researchers and adults as we seek children's perspectives?" (Sumsion 2003: 8)

Rather than providing the definitive 'answers' often required of research, researchers who really work from this perspective need to

accept that their work will often produce more questions than answers. They need to convince other adults (academic colleagues, government officers, politicians) that the voices of children are important in and of themselves and that this requires a level of commitment to children *as children*. Children, not 'the child' are 'the purpose behind the purpose' in this kind of research.

This 'simple' fact must therefore shape the types of decisions the researcher makes during the research process and also, as in the case of Caroline Jones and her study on children's understanding and experience of death and bereavement, whether there will even be a 'research project'. The methodology adopted by Jones (a teacher and researcher) involved a class of seven and eight year olds in a series of six writing lessons on death. Reading through the children's stories Jones found that she was unable to remain detached from the children's words. She felt that it was a betrayal to use the children's personal accounts on such a sensitive subject as 'research data':

As I began to read what they had written I realised the project was doomed. Until that point I had felt 'objective', only now did I acknowledge that I could not treat their words as 'data'. There was no way I would make the results of their efforts open to public scrutiny. I had not considered the potential emotional impact of using children as 'subjects' ... Suddenly, I cared too much (Jones 2000: 95).

Against the kind of genuinely ‘children centred’ research, exemplified by Jones’ study and the decisions she reached, it is evident that research that seeks to understand and provide answers to adult social problems still has ‘adults’ at the centre in the sense that they, and their concerns, are primary rather than the (infinitely variable) lives and experiences of individual children. As a result the children are obscured from view in favour of an abstract notion – ‘the child’ – from which data is generated to throw light on the problem the researcher, from the perspective of the adult world, wishes to investigate. Because the language and method adopted in genuinely ‘children centred’ and ‘child as abstract category’ research can be similar, it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle the two. My point, though, is that if we look to the *purpose* behind the research in each case we find that it is fundamentally different and this shapes both the process and the claims that the research makes.

In the following section I look at the research on racism by Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) and Holmes (1995) and discuss whether, even though they challenged the nature of ‘the child’ and employed a naturalistic methodology, their focus was still narrowed by an ‘adult centred’ research topic and the purpose. I then compare the process of the research and the claims made with two pieces of research that I

believe are ‘children centred’ – one by Glauser on ‘Street Children’ and the other by Christensen on ‘Quality time’.

The issues discussed in this introductory section – having a social problem as a starting point for the research and the intent behind the research – are intertwined throughout the following discussion rather than being treated separately.

A study of racism or of children?

It is worth reflecting on the kind of data that are likely to be produced through research that is more or less solely directed by the researcher’s interests rather than the priorities and agendas of the respondents. This calls for sincere consideration of whether the subject of the research makes sense to them and how it may be made to reflect their experiences and perceptions (Christensen 2004: 171).

Chapter Three of this thesis noted how psychological research has produced a plethora of data on children and racism, employing techniques such as ethnic awareness and ethnic preference techniques. Being critical of the kind of research that entailed forced answers in unnatural conditions, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001)¹⁰ chose an ethnographic method that, they claimed, would allow them to observe children in their ‘natural world’. They also challenged the traditional view of children as ‘objects’ of research.

¹⁰ The reference referred to throughout this section is Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001.

In this way, Van Ausdale and Feagin clearly set out to view children as social actors in their own right, indeed the argument that runs through their book relies on this premise. They argue, for example, that the unwillingness to acknowledge racist attitudes among young children is based on the assumption that young children are, as yet, ‘untutored in the ways of adults’ and that, if they do not use racist language, this is because they do not yet actively construct the world in this way, or that – when and if children do use racist language – it is out of ignorance or naiveté (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 3). They go on to contend that ignoring the way that children actively create their social reality allows adults to deny that racism can exist and develop in children of this young age.

Either assumption allows adults to ignore the possibility that children are actively reproducing in their everyday lives the matters and realities of race and racism. Neither situation is reasonable, however, since racism remains systemic in US. Society. When adults indulge in such denial, they neglect children’s present, active reality and fail to understand how children’s actions also create and re-create society (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 3).

Like Van Ausdale and Feagin, Holmes¹¹ wished to “convey young children’s knowledge of race and ethnicity in their own terms” (Holmes 1995: 3). As noted in Chapter Three, Holmes *did* question the use of the term race, deciding instead to use ‘ethnic group’.

¹¹ The research by Holmes referred to throughout this section is Holmes 1995.

However her critique of the given nature of race appears to be lost once Holmes begins to question the children. As illustrated by the following extracts, her line of questioning constantly focuses on a simple frame of reference (skin colour) obscuring other points of connection and differentiation important to each particular child:

- Inv: Is there a difference between someone who is black and somebody who is white?
J: (she nods yes)
Inv: What is the difference?
J: Well, somebody's skin is white, and somebody's skin is black or brown. Some skin is white, and some is black. They're different 'cause that's the way it is. This one is black, this one is brown. (She is holding up a brown and a black crayon for me.)
(Holmes 1995: 112)

And again with 'M', an European American boy:

- Inv. Are there different kinds of people?
M: No, yes
Inv. What kinds are there?
M: Black people, white, brown
Inv: What is the difference between black people and white people?
M: One's brown and one's white. That's me (He is pointing to his drawing).
Inv: If I asked you what the word *black* means to you, what do you think they mean?
M: Green, white, black (he is naming the crayon colors in his box)
Inv: If someone said the word *black* to you, what do you think they mean?
M: B-l-a-c-k (He is spelling the word, using the crayon box as a guideline).
Inv: If you had your choice, would you rather be white or black?
M: Stay white
Inv: Why?
M: Cause I'm white.

- Inv: If you were to describe yourself, how would you do that?
Please tell me about M.
- M: Um, I have a sister, and her name is J, like J in our class
(he is pointing to his classmate outside). And I have a
boat, my dad's boat, not mine. My sister has a boat, a
little boat.
- Inv: If you had a girlfriend, would she have to be the same
color as you?
- M: No. It would be okay if she was different.
- Inv: Would you ever choose a black girlfriend?
- M: Yeah
- Inv: How would you feel about her?
- M: Good. I forgot to make my hair.
- Inv: What do you think the word *race* means?
- M: Like having a race and see who wins.
- Inv: You said girlfriends and boyfriends could be different
colors. What about mommies and daddies?
- M: They could be different.

(Holmes 1995: 112-113).

Against Holmes' claims that she abandoned the concept of race, it is evident that her questions only make sense in the context of a study on racism. The focus of the questions here is racism, not 'social relationships' generally. Furthermore, the questions are closed so that the only relevant answers are those which relate to the colour of a person's skin (for example, is there a difference between someone who is black and somebody who is white?). In this way children's attention was almost forcibly brought to bear on skin colour whether or not that was an important factor in their reckoning at the outset. In other words, Holmes was at risk of creating the states of consciousness she set out to investigate.

An interview with 4 year old Stefan actually causes Holmes to reflect on the questions that she asked:

I learned one of the most genuine lessons from Stefan in the following conversation. I asked him, "How does it feel to be black". Stefan replied, "I don't know, Robyn, It feels like a person. I'm just a person, and that's all I know." I came to the same conclusion as Stefan. I'm not really certain what it feels

like to be the color white and have never given this fact any thought. It seems reasonable to suppose that, for children and adults, being a color is equated with just being a person (Holmes 1995: 54).

While this insight appears approximately in the middle of the book it is unclear at what point Holmes came to it as interviews quoted both before and after it focus on issues of race and colour. In general she also appears unaware that her line of questioning is making little sense to the children. Rather, at times she almost seems to try and force the children's answers to match the research question – the topic is fixed and the reality of the children is bent to fit it. Potential opportunities to follow the children's own conceptualisations about how they see themselves are possibly missed because of the closed nature of the topic.

The problematic nature of adult-directed research is further highlighted by the research conducted by Mehan and Wood (1975). Their study clearly illustrates how the social realities of the adults asking questions and the children answering them can be quite different. In this study, the researchers looked at children's perceptions and understandings of tests that were carried out in first grade of primary school in California. In one such test the children were asked to choose which word "goes best" with the picture on the opposite side of the page. For example the word "fly" points to

pictures of a dog, an elephant and a bird. Many of the first grade children chose the elephant, either alone or with the bird, as their answer. When a researcher queried why they had chosen the elephant they responded "That's Dumbo". In another test children were shown a picture of a medieval fortress and asked to choose which consonant the word describing the picture started with: D, C or G. The correct answer was C for Castle, but many of the children chose D. When asked the name of the building the children replied "Disneyland". In giving the "wrong" answers to the questions the children were seen to have "failed" and to have a lesser ability to categorise and work in abstractions (Mehan and Wood 1975: 39).

While Van Ausdale and Feagin had challenged the methods of previous research and wished to view children as social actors in their own right they did not address the inconsistency between this claim (viewing children as actors in their own right) and superimposing (without the children's knowledge, consent or input as it were), a frame of reference coming directly from their own world as professional educators and sociologists. To the contrary, and evident in the following quote, they unselfconsciously saw the role of their research as understanding the development of racism in an effort to eradicate it:

Part of the task facing educators and others seeking change is to recognize first how central the tools of race and racism are in the social toolbox. Once that is fully realized, we can begin working toward rendering the tools of race and racism obsolete. A first step must be to address, reduce and eventually vanquish engrained racist ideas and discriminatory practices in all social settings and institutions (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 201).

While their research involved observation rather than interviews, Van Ausdale and Feagin's starting point and interpretation was similar to that of Holmes in that it operated in a relatively closed circuit, shutting off the possibility that children might be thinking of other things and/or that different interpretations not related to racism could plausibly be offered of the same events. A case in point is the following incident, recounted by Van Ausdale and Feagin, when Brittany (described as '4 white') is having a discussion with Mike ('4 black') on the colour of his rabbit. Brittany, to the frustration of Mike, is insisting that Mike's rabbit must be black because Mike is black. As Mike is getting upset about Brittany's insistence about the colour of his rabbit, Van Ausdale becomes involved in the conversation and asks:

"Why don't you think he has a white rabbit at home?" "He can't", the child replies calmly, gazing at Mike without blinking or smiling. He renews his howls. Debi hugs him and rubs his back as he sits with her, then tries again, asking Mike to describe his rabbit. "She's *white!*" he says indignantly, scowling at Brittany and ignoring Debi. His body stiffens. "Nope" she replies again, "you do not". Mike screams at her, stomping his feet for emphasis, "I do too!" Debi takes Brittany's hand, continuing to query her while Mike watches from the comfort of

Debi's lap. Brittany informs her, "He cant have a white rabbit". Completely confused by now, Debi finally asks her why, and she calmly says "Because he's Black" (Van Ausdale, Feagin 2001: 102).

In their discussion of this incident, the authors argue that Brittany is operating within a 'separatist model' whereby rabbits must be segregated by colour, surmising that:

It is clear that she has a firm conceptualization of appropriate racial identities and role performances. As she understands and speaks the social world, there are certain things that people holding a Black identity cannot do, and there are certain privileges that those who hold a white identity are permitted to do. Clearly, the latter is superior to the former (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001: 102).

In this discussion, the authors take a conceptual leap whereby the children's comments demonstrating an awareness of skin colour are tied to 'firm conceptualisation of appropriate racial identities and role performances'. But there are other plausible readings of this same incident which do not take this leap, and which hold off the inference of racism made by Van Ausdale and Feagin. If, for example, we were to imagine the same conversation but with the words boy and girl replacing black and white, the conversation could well suggest either a particular form of 'childlike' categorisation of association or simply of Brittany teasing Mike. If Brittany had kept asserting that Mike could only have a boy rabbit and not a girl one because he is a boy and Mike had got frustrated and upset at not being able to convince her otherwise (and Brittany had got amused at the scene she was creating) would similar conclusions have been reached regarding the superiority of girls?

In illustrating the sophistication of children's use of racial material and epithets Van Ausdale and Feagin repeatedly return to another,

parallel, incident. This, particularly because it takes such a central place in their report, merits further discussion. The author's recount that:

Carla, a three-year-old child, is preparing herself for resting time. She picks up her cot and starts to move it to the other side of the classroom. A teacher asks what she is doing. "I need to move this", explains Carla. "Why?" asks the teacher. "Because I cant sleep next to a nigger", "Niggers are stinky. I cant sleep next to one." Stunned, the teacher, who is white, tells Carla to move her cot back and not to use "hurting words". Carla looks amused but complies (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2000: 1).

I have found it useful to compare this incident with one I encountered during my time observing at the centre. At the end of the outdoor play session in a ten minute period before lunch, the children would be gathered together to listen to a story. The children would sit on a mat or the grass while a carer sat at the front on a chair waiting for the children to get settled. On one particular day Phoebe sat down next to Bridget and Annabel then moved to another spot on the mat while muttering the words "I'm not sitting next to smelly people". It was not evident whether the carer had heard Phoebe's words but she was told to hurry up and sit down and the carer got on with the task of reading. Other than there not being the same significance attached to the words 'smelly people' as 'nigger', the story is remarkably similar – even the children's reaction when they were told off – Carla looked "amused and puzzled", Phoebe also looked amused. Do Phoebe's words infer a deep seated attitude about the two children she sat next to? One would assume not as she had been playing with the same children earlier and would again later. As we saw in Chapter Four, Phoebe was inclined to be moody and when she was in one of these moods she would often say mean things to other children. She was also always very keen to get adult's attention – if new adults came

into the centre she would show off or be naughty to get noticed. Could her words have been primarily to get a reaction?

It is important to stress that I am not making claims against the 'validity' of the studies examined here. I am not asserting that the researchers 'got it wrong' and that I, on the other hand, got it 'right'. Rather, I am suggesting that there are –as always in the social world – alternative readings of the same events which may become more apparent if the focus is changed slightly and these alternative readings may provide important insights into children's lives.

Researching children, not 'the child'

The previous section used the work of Van Ausdale and Feagin and Holmes to illustrate some of the implications of having an adult driven purpose behind research involving children. While these researchers might have 'misused' the methodology of ethnography, I believe it was this primary adult-driven purpose that shaped the subsequent research and findings. In this section I explore research on children that has been driven by a different purpose – that of understanding children and their lives in the here and now. This purpose shapes the research from the outset with the conceptualisation of the research topic and questions, through the decisions made during the process and to the claims made about the research when completed.

The research question/topic

In my own empirical research it was not until I had abandoned my initial research question that I was able to 'see' important factors of the children's lives such as transience and pragmatism – factors that were not specifically related to my broad topic of 'children and difference', but nonetheless provided important insights into the social lives of children. By 'locking in' the research question which sought to address an adult problem, Van Ausdale and Feagin and Holmes possibly closed off opportunities to discover other issues that were important to the children they were observing. In contrast, in his study on 'children of the street' Glauser (1997) is clear from the outset that his primary interest is in understanding what life on the street means for the children that spend time there. His purpose is not to 'solve' the problem of street children as it affects adults but to gain information that would inform an educational program designed for these children:

The need to know more about the situation, characteristics, feelings and problems in the everyday life of street children arose from an increasing urge to take action on their behalf (Glauser 1997: 145).

Glauser's purpose clearly influences the course of his research from that point on. Because he is seeking to understand the lived reality of the children's lives and not just the abstract concept of 'street

children' the research question needed to 'fit' this reality. Glauser found the term 'Children of the Street' used by agencies such as UNICEF, non-government agencies, social workers and social researchers proved problematic in his attempts to determine who were 'children of the street' and who were not. He argues that the differentiation is usually based on the relationship between 'the child' and 'his/her family', terms which need to be unpacked to uncover some of the assumptions they hide. Furthermore, the circumstances that led to children being on the street were diverse: some stayed on the street during the week and went home on the weekend or spent the summers on the street and went home for the winter; others spent time on the street due to their jobs but also went home (Glauser 1997: 145). Rather than trying to fit the complexity of these children's lives to a set category, Glauser eventually saw the positive side of not having a clear definition:

While I seemed to know intuitively which street children were, and which were not, 'children of the street' when meeting them, in the course of my daily work I found myself having difficulties explaining the generation of the categories. Was this a general problem of the concept of 'children of the street', or was it just to do with the way I had understood and applied it? Everyday observation continued to confront me with children in new and different situations and, after coming to terms with my anger about my apparent incapacity to apply what had seemed to be a clear definition, I began to appreciate the creative side of my confusion. I became curious about what else I might come across (Glauser 1997: 146).

Through his research Glauser developed an alternative way of conceptualising the diverse lives of children who spent time on the street but acknowledged that this conceptualisation was also a work in progress.

By *not* adhering to a predefined definition and putting the desire to understand the children's lives first, Glauser not only reconceptualised his notion of street children but also recognised the danger of *not* challenging conceptions that can have very real impacts on children's lives:

My practical difficulties had therefore led me to discover that the terms and concepts used about street children were not only imprecise but also that they lacked operational value. The same terms were used in different parts of the world to refer to very different types and situations of children. This means that when talking about street children we may do so without having a clear idea about what we are talking and, in addition, we take the risk of mutual misunderstanding. In spite of this the terms and concepts mentioned above seem to have a surprising general acceptance. Clearly from a methodological and scientific point of view this is of course unacceptable. But it is even less acceptable that international organizations, policy makers, social institutions and individuals who feel entitled to intervene in the lives of children with problems, do so on the basis of obviously unclear and arbitrary knowledge about the reality of these children's lives (Glauser 1997: 150).

Christensen (2002) also points to the problems involved in deploying concepts which assume a knowledge of children and what would be best for them without asking the children themselves. In her study of

'quality time', a concept that has emerged from the discourse on working parents and family time, Christensen (2002) challenges the concept which, she argues, is "based on assumptions of what would be 'good' for today's children and neglect the perspective of children themselves" (Christensen 2002: 77). She argues that notions of quality time are also based on normative assumptions – 'ideals' - about parents and families:

'Quality time' epitomises the ideal image of 'happy families' and here parents are key actors. Parents are responsible for making time and situations when, by giving children their undivided attention, create 'family time' as a harmonious experience of togetherness. This is to be achieved through parents and children engaging in activities that communicate and support their mutual affection and enjoyment (Christensen 2002: 79).

Christensen conducted a survey involving 489 year seven children and an intensive ethnography with 70 children, looking at what 'family time' and 'quality time' meant to them. The ethnographic interviews revealed that the children's views about time were quite different from the philosophy of 'quality time' espoused by adults. In this respect Christensen identified five aspects of time that the children valued:

- a) the value of family time as ordinariness and routine
- b) the value of family time as someone being there for you
- c) the value of having a say over one's time
- d) the value of time for having peace and quiet
- e) the value of being able to plan one's own time

(Christensen 2002)

As Christensen argues, the children's responses demonstrate that, for them, 'quality time' cannot be reduced to a kind of "Filofax-timeslot"—a block of time that can be scheduled on a Friday afternoon for family 'activities', concluding that:

It is also apparent that when asked if they would like to have more time with their parents most of the children in this study said 'No!' However, there was a general consent among children that knowing that their parents would be there for them when they needed them was of much greater importance (Christensen 2002: 83).

Christensen and Glausen's research illustrates the important insights that can be gained by challenging the adultcentric conceptualisation of issues and acknowledging the complexity of children's lives.

Method vs Methodology: a reflexive process

Here lies the ultimate responsibility of the researcher. The comfortable assumption that it is the reliability and accuracy of the methodologies being used that will ascertain the validity of the outcomes of the research, thereby reducing the researcher's responsibility to a technical matter, is rejected (Ang 1996 47).

As discussed in chapter three, just as I needed to adjust my research question while in the field, so I needed to adjust certain key aspects of my method. The decision to use the role of 'least adult' proved to be problematic and the changes I made to it were based more on ethical

considerations of what 'felt right' in relation to the children than on what might be judged as 'good practice' after the event.

In her article "Researching with children: lessons in humility, reciprocity and community" Jennifer Sumsion (2003) relates the story of her first unsuccessful attempt at researching children. She reports that feeling "deflated and dejected, I retreated from the centre at the end of the week with little meaningful data, my stance as researcher severely challenged and disrupted" (Sumsion 2003: 1). A year later Sumsion returned to her research informed by what she had learned before and approached the children with humility – inviting them to talk to her but leaving the questions of availability and location to the children:

Being humble meant curbing my impatience, relinquishing my customary preoccupation with accumulating data, fitting in with the children's rhythms, and valuing their time and agendas above mine (Sumsion 2003: 8)

Similarly, in "Research with children: ethical mind-fields" Lyn Fasoli (2001) recognises the challenges of researching children when she reflects on the interviews taped during her research:

Reflecting on this transcript is a sobering exercise. I hear, in my voice, a researcher becoming impatient to do her research and using (or at least attempting to use) her position to push the proceedings forward...

Despite my good intentions to work collaboratively, to allow children to have equitable input into the research process, to privilege and give voice to their interests and concerns, I have clearly overlooked these aspirations in the heat of the research process (Fasoli 2001: 5).

By reflecting on such issues both of these authors gained important insights into some of the issues of researching children. Reflecting on my own research – especially my naivety before entering the field – is also a sobering exercise. However the gaps between my expectations before doing the research and the reality of the actual experience enabled me to develop insights that would not have been possible if the research had gone ‘according to plan’. For example I was forced to confront issues regarding the roles of adults and children, the particular ethical issues involved when researching children, and the importance of reflexivity in the field. But more importantly it made me question *why* I was doing the research and who it was *for*.

Christensen also records learning the ‘hard way’ when she reflects that “my development of good research practice was prompted by the children’s initial refusal to engage in the research and closely connected to the ambiguity of my role” (Christensen 2004: 168). When she first started interviewing the children in her study on children’s health and wellbeing the interviews were on a specific topic. While the children had control over the process (for example they

could stop the interview when they wanted) it was not until later that she was able to ascertain what the children had really thought of both herself and the content of her initial interviews.

Then I had been a 'stranger' and an 'adult', but also, as they now confided they thought the subject of our conversations (everyday health) were sometimes 'peculiar', 'rubbish' or simply 'boring' (Christensen 2004: 168).

Again, in the same study, the children revealed how they felt about Christensen's inquiries about the routines of the school, characterising them as "all your silly questions" (Christensen 2004: 168). So, in this and the earlier instance, Christensen acknowledges that while she has been able to complete the early interviews due to the co-operation of the children, the children's feedback threw into question what needed to be taken into account in conducting research with children. This forced her to change her tack, abandon her questions and adopt what she thought was closer to what the children did themselves - by observing and copying them to understand the rhythms and routines of the school day (Christensen 2004: 169). This required her to take a more 'restricted' role, prioritising observation over attempts to join in or talk to the children. For example she would not attempt to participate in an activity until she had observed what the children were doing or was invited to join in. It was this attentive observation - what she terms "the act of looking" and attentive listening that she claims were crucial to the relationships with the children during the study.

By keeping the general methodology (which had at its heart the desire to better understand young children's social lives) as central, I was able to adapt such things as the research strategy, questions and techniques and still continue with the research. This meant that I had to continually challenge the assumptions I had brought with me, to ask questions of myself and the research and to remain flexible. Christensen argues that it is only through such perseverance that the researcher can stay true to the purpose of the research and develop an understanding of children's views without him or her "making unwarranted analytical jumps" (Christensen 2004: 171).

Choosing to do ethnography with children and entering into their 'world' is therefore only the first step in a process that requires ongoing reflexivity and adjustment. The method on its own cannot 'do the work' on behalf of the researcher. This is an important point because traditionally research has been judged primarily on the method (in the sense of properly following the steps and procedures inherent in the broader methodology). If this is sound the research is deemed to be valid and instructive. This concern with following the right method is reflected in the following statement by Holmes in the conclusion to her book:

When I began studying young children's social relationships, my primary concern was whether as an adult I could gain a clear and accurate view of the world through a

child's eyes. After reading an overview of the existing literature, I pondered the methodological considerations. The question of how to collect the data was a crucial one because this technique would determine, almost exclusively, the richness of the information obtained from the children (Holmes 1995: 105).

My suggestion is that it needs to go further than this. That the 'how' of collecting data – the methods and techniques involved – need to remain constantly faithful to the philosophical and value premises inherent in the original choice of methodology and that this may well involve adjustments to methods and techniques as the research evolves. And, most important, behind all this there needs to be an integral association between the methodology and the purpose of the research.

Among other things, and on a more practical note, this suggests that the researcher needs to be careful in making claims to being 'better' or having got closer to understanding children simply because they have adopted a naturalistic methodology. As already noted, "trying to involve children and young people in decisions touching on their lives does not necessarily place researchers or others on the high moral ground" (Roberts 2000: 227). It may, indeed, muddy the waters by implying a level of participation or involvement that does not in fact exist.

How, then, might we judge the value and integrity of apparently children centred research if method alone is not a sufficient guide? While this is the topic of another thesis I suggest that the insights provided by the researcher's own self reflection and learning are one important key. Christensen and Prout suggest that "researchers' encounters with ethical dilemmas, and their ways of confronting them" (Christensen & Prout 2002: 495) must be recorded if any progress is to be made. I believe that this also relates to the complete process of children-centred research – for example, how the researcher attempts to challenge their adultcentric concepts, how they responded to the challenges involved in getting children to participate, how they adapted their questions and followed the children's lead. Reporting such things is important both because it enables researchers to learn from others and because of the children themselves. Although there are some exceptions, for the greater part children are still talked 'about' rather than talked 'to' in research accounts and have little chance to 'answer back'. It is therefore the responsibility of other researchers in the field to recognise and reflect on the nature of this gap and what it means.

The process of 'deconstructing' children and childhood and problematising dominant accounts of children has left a space for new ways of theorising and researching children. This requires that that

space be left open, to remain a 'work in progress', a conversation between the author and those who are interested in this kind of work. For such a conversation to be useful the author needs to be present in their work.

The importance of being clear about the purpose of research

Throughout this chapter I have explored how the intent or purpose behind the research can impact on both the focus of that research and the process. My intention has not been to critique Van Ausdale and Feagin and Holmes work as such but to highlight the need for researchers to be clear – both to themselves and their readers - about what their primary intention is and what that means for the research in terms of its focus and limitations. Clarity on this is obviously important at the level of the individual research. However I would argue that it is even more important in terms of the growing body of naturalistic work that is being conducted with/on children.

As the sociology of childhood is in its relative infancy there is still not a large body of ethnographic research relating to children and childhood (Qvortrup 2003: 395). Research that does observe children in their natural settings and/or seeks their perspectives is therefore inclined to be put into the same category. While those who are entrenched in the sociology of childhood might notice the difference

between research that is 'child centred' and that which remains 'adult centred', others may not. In a sense this is worse than a gap in the research because we can fool ourselves into thinking that we are developing a 'better' understanding of children's lives when in reality we are only researching those aspects that are important to adults.

There is a danger that in research like that conducted by Van Ausdale and Feagin we will come to believe that it did more than address the adult problem which was the focus of the research; that, it 'entered into the child's world' and therefore provided us with insights into children *per se*. This assumption is illustrated by the following reviews of Van Ausdale and Feagin's *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*:

As the sociology of childhood becomes a more respected and active specialty within sociology, recognition grows that adults have put far too much stock in the naive child stereotype, vastly underestimating children's sophistication and active participation in the construction of social reality. In *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*, Van Ausdale and Feagin *defly advance this evolution of our thinking about children's lives* with jarring examples of and insight into preschool children's construction, negotiation, and use of racial understanding and prejudices (Brown Rosier 2003:243 *emphasis added*).

The authors challenge directly what they call a prevalent American assumption that very young children are incapable of being "racist" or thinking racially. *Young children, they insist, are indeed capable of the "abstract" and "complex" thinking that "race" requires* (Pollock 2001: 853, *emphasis added*).

Both of these reviewers suggest that Van Ausdale and Feagin provide us with an understanding of children over and beyond the more distinct issue of what children think about race. On what basis might such a claim be made? The answer is unclear and this alone points to the danger of any such representation. For, as Lutz (1981) observes, while the focus of research is always to a degree arbitrary, we need to be clear about what it has come to be and be honest about our intent:

The question of focus is always arbitrary – for the photographer, the biologist, or the social scientist. What brings one thing into clearly observable focus distorts another thing. To focus the camera lens on the butterfly on one’s nose distorts the face; to focus on the face distorts the horizon on the background; to focus on the horizon distorts both the face and the butterfly. The same is as true in the social sciences as it is in photography. The social scientist has a right to be arbitrary. But one should not call the picture of a perfectly good butterfly a picture of a horizon (Lutz 1981: 54).

In line with this, I suggest that we need to be as clear about the ‘why’ and the ‘what’ of research on children as on questions of methodology and setting. In this sense, we need to constantly ask *why* this particular piece of research being conducted and *what* does it seek to achieve? This is not a novel point – it is one that is made in various forms throughout qualitative literature. However for researchers who are seeking to ‘do it right’ with competing demands in terms of correct methodology and rigorous research, and for policy makers who

consult with children (or use the information gained from such consultations) such questions are central. They press us to consider what the purpose behind the purpose of our research is and what it can honestly claim to be – is it a picture of the horizon or a butterfly? In the final section of this chapter I discuss how questions such as these have been informed by, and informed my practice as a researcher in a research centre.

When Purposes Collide

The arguments that I have developed throughout this thesis have not been formulated in a vacuum. Whilst the traditional model of the PhD presumes a process whereby the student goes into the field, collects data and returns to an office to ‘write it up’, the actuality is often a long way away from this linear ideal. The term of my candidature has spanned nearly four and a half years and during the past two years I have been involved in other research in my position as senior researcher and research co-ordinator at the Centre for Social and Community Research at Murdoch University. The process whereby my ideas have developed has therefore been an iterative one – my ‘thesis’ thoughts would inform how I approached other projects involving children and in turn those projects would inform my thesis.

The Centre for Social and Community Research (CSCR) was established to co-ordinate research in one of the university's areas of research strength – social change and social equity. CSCR is largely funded by the research income that it generates and therefore has to compete for research in the commercial market and respond to tenders and projects dependent on outcome based funding. It, like other centres of the same nature, has to meet both demands from the academic realm (in the development of academically rigorous and 'objective' research) and the requirements of organizations and government departments who work in an environment of 'evidence based practice' seeking 'useable' information to inform policy.

What, then, are the implications for a researcher wishing to do 'children focussed' research, which has as its primary purpose the understanding of children's lives in the here and now, within an outcome based environment (with a primary purpose of addressing problems)? In the following discussion I draw on two projects I was involved in during the last two years of my candidature to discuss this issue.

The City of Rockingham Health and Wellbeing Study

Over the past decade the Western Australian government has been active in promoting active citizenship, participation and consultation

across all groups of the community including children and young people. In response to this move, several local government councils have formed Youth Advisory Councils and Junior Councils which seek to provide young people's input into the development of policy. This sparked my interest, and towards the end of 2003 I developed a research project to ask children and young people what they thought of this process of consultation – did they think it was a good thing, and if so, what was the best way it should be done? The proposed project also had a small pilot study intended to involve children in a consultation process, drawing on the advice they provided and feeding the results back to them.

At the same time as this, CSCR had started a health and wellbeing assessment for the City of Rockingham. This project was based on a social model of health and was designed to include wide consultation with community members. During discussions it was decided that a small amount of extra money should be allocated to seek out the views of children and young people in a separate parallel study. This seemed an ideal project for the 'pilot study' component of my own proposed project – I would simply need to do both parts of the study at the same time. Due to the size of the budget allocated to the project my role was to be that of consultant working with a member from the City of Rockingham youth team. The project team,

consisting of members from the funding body (the Health Department) and the City of Rockingham, were supportive of my aims to find out what the children thought about the consultation process while at the same time seeking to gain some qualitative data for their own purposes.

The research design for this project involved participation of members of the City of Rockingham Junior Council - a council which is made up of Year Seven students (11/12 year olds) drawn from all of the primary schools in the area. Five groups were formed to organise a focus group of their peers in their geographical area. These consultations were to be held in succession so that each consultation could inform the next, with the children reporting their experiences back to the larger group and the lessons learned being incorporated into the next design.

Diverging purposes

During the first meeting with the first group of Junior Councillors it became evident that the participants believed the only way that children would take part in the consultations was if they were held during school hours at school. The five focus groups thus became a series of 21 focus groups held during school hours requiring co-ordination of the teachers and parent consent forms.

During the course of the project, access to the Junior Councillors became difficult because of other Council commitments and school holidays. This made the original iterative process impossible. While it was not desirable, the series of focus groups needed to proceed without the groups reporting back on the majority of the occasions. Towards the end of the project it was also decided that a questionnaire would be sent out to determine whether the information gathered from the focus groups was representative. As a result of these factors, the primary purpose of the project increasingly became the gathering of 'data' rather than gaining an understanding of what children and young people thought of the process of consultation.

It was not, however, until the first draft of the report was issued that it became apparent how far my purposes and the purposes of other members of the project team had diverged. While I wished to foreground the voices of the children and young people in an accessible report that could be read by the young people themselves, their parents and other community members, the project team was keen to produce a report that fulfilled the customary requirements of a government report and couching the 'findings' in community development terms such as 'strengths'.

The project spanned a period of approximately nine months and the shift in primary purpose described above occurred incrementally. The implications of the decisions that were being made about method were not evident until the project was near completion. Indeed the first decision that could be seen to have changed the nature of the project was to take the children's advice and to conduct the focus groups at school during school hours. This was, I believed, being true to the process we had set out to do – there was no point in asking the children for their advice if we were not going to follow it. Ironically however this would eventually build an expectation of a more representative study than was ever envisaged initially. Finally, I found producing the report required a great deal of compromise in terms of what I had initially set out to achieve. Much of the time I would have liked to use reflecting on the process was spent analysing figures and compiling graphs. The challenge of the report writing process for research that incorporates the perspectives of children is discussed by Mason et al (2003):

... acknowledging children as co-constructors of knowledge in this project has challenged how we as researchers represent children in reporting on the project. For example, it has meant that we have resisted employing isolated quotes from children (or from any other groups of stakeholders) in this discussion. For us, as (adult) researchers, selecting children's words to fit our text, at this stage of the process, would mean simplifying and therefore devaluing the children's and other respondents contributions (Mason et al 2003: 37).

Similarly, I found that requests for traditional reporting requirements such as an executive summary jarred with my desire to let the children's words speak for themselves. Like Mason and her colleagues, I found that summarising the 'findings' under headings such as 'strengths' required a level of simplification of the children's views that was contrary to the methodology of the project.

While I had felt uneasy at different points during the project it was not until after its completion, when I was close to finishing this thesis, that I was able to articulate the fundamental problem: namely, the *purpose* of the research had changed without this being consciously recognised and discussed by members of the project team. The fact that this shift in purpose was able to slip below the plane of sight owed much to the fact that all members of the project team overtly shared the same aim – to find out about children. Our notions of 'finding out' were however inherently different. I was interested in finding out about what it was like to be an eleven or twelve year old living in Rockingham in terms of issues such as what was important to them about where they lived, what made them feel respected and what they thought about the consultation process. The larger project team were more interested in finding out information that could be 'used' to feed into policy and to provide a 'snapshot' of the strengths of the City of Rockingham in terms of their children and young people.

Why Young People Desist from Crime

Discussion regarding this project came late in my candidature when I was writing and thinking about questions relating to 'the purpose behind the purpose'. A community group approached CSCR about the possibility of our becoming involved in a project for which they had already prepared the funding proposal. Building on a body of criminology literature on 'desistance', the question the project sought to answer was how young people came to desist from crime, that is, after being convicted of offences how they went on the 'straight and narrow'. The proposed methodology was qualitative, suggesting that it sought to hear the experiences and views of the young people. To this end sixty young people would be interviewed either individually, in 'friendship pairs' or in focus groups.

From the outset, and informed by my thinking on the thesis as well as by my experiences on the Health & Wellbeing project, I was clear that to be involved at all on this project I needed to articulate the difference between what they sought to achieve (find out why young people desist so that future interventions can be effectively targeted at young people) and what I sought (develop an understanding of these young people's lives and the part crime played in them). While the community group were probably more interested in the kinds of

practical advice I was able to give at this stage, this ‘purpose clearing’ element, and the recognition of the ability to articulate both to myself and the client that we would need to identify some sort of common ground if we were to work together on the project, was important. A discussion about what the eventual final report might look like – that it would centre on the stories of the young people, not tables and graphs – helped to establish just what the common ground might be.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that when research is conducted in order to answer an adult conceptualised problem there is a danger that, even when employing a naturalistic methodology and viewing children as social actors, the research will, by necessity, focus on the *category* of ‘the child’ rather than the lived experiences of individual children. To provide answers regarding ‘the child’ the complexity and richness of children’s lives must be stripped away and simplified. Seeking to understand ‘children’ requires the researcher to be open to the opportunity to see things differently – not already predefined by an adult conceptualised problem.

When the focus is on the ‘how’ of research – the methodology, the setting and the method of analysis – questions about the purpose of the research, whether it ultimately seeks to ‘reform’ or ‘understand’

can be overlooked. This is perhaps particularly the case when essentially reformist studies uses the language of the sociology of childhood and employs ethnographic methods.

In *Theorising Childhood* James et al (1998) state that:

It is timely, not to say urgent, that a discussion about methods of researching children takes place ... there is a need to pay heed to methodology lest the upsurge of research activity about children and childhood fails to reap a proper and considered benefit (James et al 1998: 190).

However while James et al (1998: 190) acknowledge that “problems, theories and methods in social science” are interrelated, their focus remains primarily on methodological issues:

Childhood studies cannot – and indeed should not – escape the methodological critique characteristic of debate in the social sciences (James et al 1998: 170).

From inside the discipline this is of course a valid point. For the sociology of childhood to achieve any status as a sub-discipline the research that is produced must be seen as valid and rigorous as any other sociological research. However the sociology of childhood faces a problem that is perhaps unique from other sub-disciplines of sociology in that *any* sociological research that relates to children (or even research from other disciplines that employs qualitative methods) can find a place under its banner. It is therefore important

that research that seeks to understand the lives of *children* is distinguished from research that continues to provide understandings of 'the child' for adult purposes or the work of the sociology of childhood is in danger of not reaping a 'proper and considered benefit'.

Chapter Seven: Implications for Practice

During my fieldwork and certainly afterwards, my attention was pulled away from the initial topic of my study. Early on I sensed something larger concerning the methodology and purpose of research on children was at play and during the course of my candidature much of my energy went into exploring what this might be. However I still have two obligations to fulfil: to the industry partners who partly funded my scholarship and the children who were part of my study. These are addressed in this final chapter.

Inclusion – in the here and now

In the previous chapter I discussed what became the central thesis of this dissertation: the importance of clarity (and honesty) concerning the purpose behind research on or with children. There is also another important underlying theme: the importance of valuing children and their lives in the here and now, not just in terms of what they might become at some point in the future. I now return to the initial topic of my PhD – inclusive practice in childcare – to discuss how adherence to this latter principle might inform theory and practice in this area. My discussion is based on the insights that I gained during my time in the field and how these relate to some of the challenges that face inclusion in childcare in Australia, as identified

by Llewellyn (2002) and Sims (2003). It is not my intention to enter into a wider debate on child care policy or practice but rather to look at how my time in the field might add to, or support other research in this area.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the philosophy that drives the SUPS program (which seeks to optimise access for children with special needs into mainstream childcare centres) is one of 'inclusion'. The theory of inclusive practice draws heavily on certain established philosophical and educational rationales. For example, it is argued that children have a right to the same opportunities as 'typically developing' children, that the benefits to the child in developmental terms are superior within mainstream classes, and that children without special needs should be provided with opportunities to learn tolerance for difference (Odom & Diamond 1998: 3).

In their review of the topic, Odom and Diamond (1998) note that policy often focuses on factors that improve *access* to inclusive preschool services. A recent consultation paper produced by the Australian Federal Government on Child Care Support reflects such an approach with principles identified such as:

- Child care services eligible for inclusion and professional support, regardless of their geographic location, have access to quality inclusion and professional support that is relevant, appropriate and timely.
- Inclusion and professional support is targeted to meet identified needs and Australian Government priorities.
- Inclusion and Professional Support Program features better integration with quality assurance, responsiveness to changing conditions and support needs (Australian Government 2004: 8)

While at the policy level equity of access is the primary goal, Llewellyn et al (2002) point to a large body of research that has stressed that inclusive practice is only beneficial when accompanied by “high quality programs and appropriate curricula” (Llewellyn et al 2002: 1). They go on to argue that, given the number of stakeholders across the level of government, not-for-profit, community and private enterprise, there are many opportunities for inclusion to become “derailed” between the policy arena and the implementation of that policy (Llewellyn et al 2002: 2). This is perhaps exacerbated by a policy framework that measures outcomes in terms of access rather than the (perhaps unmeasurable) quality of the day to day lives of the children once they are in the centre. Furthermore, such policy is focussed on particular children. While the policy of inclusion in childcare in Australia has four target groups, the word ‘inclusion’ appears to have become synonymous with the inclusion of children

with disabilities, for example in their article on inclusion, Llewellyn et al refer only to children with disabilities (Llewellyn et al 2002: 2).

The gap between the philosophical principles of inclusion and the outcome focus of the government policy is large and both seem distant from the practical issues with which adults must deal in terms of inclusive practice. Furthermore, the insights I gained during my observations suggest that as far as the children's day to day lives are concerned the philosophical base and the outcome imperative are yet more remote.

During my observations I came to see the importance of seeing the word 'inclusion' as a verb, the practice of including small people; rather than a noun – a principle or policy framework. At the level of the category – the disabled child, the culturally or ethnically diverse child – it is indeed difficult to imagine policies which can be implemented across the board in childcare centres which would actually make a difference for those concerned. Placing a sign that says 'hello' in different languages exposes children to different cultures but does it translate to inclusion of all children on a hour to hour, day to day basis? The point that I am trying to establish here is that 'inclusion', within this framework is about the inclusion of all children, for as I noted earlier in the thesis, it is not only those

children regarded as 'different' from an adultcentric framework that have trouble integrating with other children.

Recognising the pragmatic, practical nature of children's interactions, discussed in Chapter Five, suggests some of the ways the principle of inclusion could be translated into practical activities and support for *all* children. Often during the course of my time in the centre I would start a game of 'chasey' or 'going to the zoo on the bus' and many of the children who were, up to that point, sitting and watching would join in. Similarly, and again in practical terms, children new to the centre often needed an adult to support their transition. This might just be someone who they could sit beside or play with in the sandpit while they got to know the other children and developed their confidence. The importance of this one-on-one interaction is reflected in interviews with SUPS workers in Sims (2003) research. Participants stressed the importance of the way staff interacted with the children - in emotional as well as physical terms - as being a key element in 'quality service':

Quality care is the relationship between the workers and the children ... actually playing with the children, getting down to them on their level.

Being involved rather than supervising. That includes cuddling and loving the children (Sims 2003: 4).

The importance of this adult-child relationship adds a different dimension to my initial research hunch that the children's happiness – and feelings of being included – were less likely to revolve around whether they had to wear shoes or if they got rice to eat at lunchtime as to whether the other children accepted them and played with them. The research modified this view when I found that, for various reasons, many of the children chose to spend time on their own for. What became clear was that it was often not the company of other children that they craved but that of an adult – especially their parents. When an adult came into the centre they were often swamped by children who wanted their attention. I am thus suggesting that emotional and practical support from adult carers is a key element in determining whether there can indeed be a culture of inclusion within a centre. Unfortunately, this element appeared to be lacking in the children's day at the centre I attended, with other researchers such as Leavitt (1995) and Sims (1993) reporting similar findings. However, a ratio of ten children per adult (set by national standards) leaves little room for anything but basic care.

New children were expected to 'get on with it' and got little support from the carers – either in emotional or practical terms. While the children were introduced at the morning mat session they were expected to mix with the other children and to find their own friends.

In part this seemed to be driven by a belief that if the children were 'pandered to' they would not learn to be independent, but it may also derive from the assumption that childhood is a time of play and friendship and that children 'naturally' want others to play with. For some children (like some adults), this was indeed the case, for many others it was not. I found that this lack of emotional support often distressed me and distracted me from simply recording the children's actions and interactions. On some days I would be quite upset and angry when I left the centre and I required frequent 'debriefing' sessions with my supervisor, as the following entries in my diary illustrate:

Day 9: I came away feeling very angry today. A new girl started and she didn't get any emotional support at all. Do the carers learn not to make a fuss of children when they are upset when they do their training? Apparently it is valid to cry if you hurt yourself but not simply because you are upset.

Day 12: I came away feeling sad and angry again today. I felt that my research was really secondary today because I spent a lot of time pacifying children.

My frustration was levelled more at the situation than the carers. The ratio of ten children to one carer allows little time for more than meeting the physical needs of the children. As noted earlier, this ratio, combined with the training and experience of staff has been identified by Llewellyn et al (2002) and Sims (2003) as one of the

primary barriers to inclusive practice. In their 2004 annual report, RUCSN expressed this concern along with other issues relating to the quality of care for *all* children:

While many services provide excellent care and education opportunities for children, the Inclusion Support Workers visit many more services that have very low quality standards. Inadequate staff to children ratios; unqualified and unskilled staff; caring staff who are restricted by adverse policies of owners and coordinators; lack of resources and facilities – there are the major areas of concern. Quality Care and Inclusive Practice are two sides of the same coin – it is impossible to include a child with special needs in a service where the program is failing to meet the needs of all of the children (RUCSN 2004: 4).

While I only visited one other centre during my study, my experience of childcare centres as a parent and researcher gives me reason to believe that the centre in which I was observing was one that had high quality standards. However Sims (2003) argues that for as long as caregivers' work is "undervalued and underpaid" concerns regarding quality will remain, for it is the care of all children that is lacking, not just those with special needs:

... They're working under a huge strain and you don't blame them when they go outside and all they want to do is just stand there and supervise and not play with the children because they are so burnt out and they need that down time ... (Sims 2003: 8).

Often the case regarding issues of 'quality care' in childcare is couched in terms of risks to development outcomes (e.g. Belsky 1999;

Sims 2003; Vandell 2001). In other words, if children do not receive quality care at this important stage of their life there will be ramifications in the future in terms of behaviour and cognitive development. While that may well be the case, it is unfortunate that the primary way to judge the adequacy of the care of children is by reference to *future* effects. At the centre where I observed, much time and effort was put in to meeting the children's developmental needs. A program of activities for the week was displayed on the wall for parents; a variety of play equipment to encourage different developmental outcomes was made available on different days; and assessments were conducted on the children on a regular basis to ensure that they were developing 'normally'. But what of the quality of the day to day lives of the children in the here and now? While not dismissing the importance of the provision of activities and opportunities for development in childcare centres, if, in the face of staff shortages, the choice is between a cuddle for a child who is having a bad day and an activity being supervised which will develop fine motor skills, should the cuddle not win?

And what of the children?

And the children? Did I always, as I stated in justifying my critical narrative, consider paramount my responsibility to these other innocents, wholly dependent on adults to meet their physical and emotional needs? Has my work made their voices (or only mine) heard? (Leavitt 1998: 63).

During the course of this study my attention was pulled away from the minutiae of the children's lives to issues of methodology and the intent of research. However the details of these children's lives were nevertheless vitally important to this project. In part, this relates to the research process itself for it was only in observing the children in the minutiae of their daily activities at length that I could appreciate the complexities of their lives and the problematic nature of research that sought to cleanse itself of this complexity. But there is another equally important reason why it was important that my accounts from within the day care centre were included. This is simply because there is a paucity of research that seeks to provide a snapshot of children's day to day lives in day care. As Graue and Walsh state:

Researchers do studies, for example, of day care but ignore the lived realities of the many children who, from a very early age, spend most of their waking hours in institutional care. The result is, as Wolf (1995) points out, findings about academic backgrounds of day care teachers, how everything about day care that can be measured correlates with everything else that can be measured (whether it makes sense or not) – everything about day care except what it is like for children, and adults, to be there day after day, week after week (Graue & Walsh 1998: xvi).

Often, during the course of my observations, I wished I could give others a glimpse into the day to day lives of the children I was observing. Unfortunately, academic writing does not lend itself to such a visual rendering, for I did not wish to point towards anything interesting or noteworthy but to invite the reader to simply sit and watch with me. The experience has shown me the importance for adults to regularly stop, sit down on a very small chair or in a sandpit and attempt to see things from the child's view from time to time. I learnt this lesson early in my study when the campus newspaper wished to take a photo to go with an article that had been written about my proposed research project. It was organised that the photo would be taken at the childcare centre on the campus grounds: several children were identified as being available, their parents signed the correct consent form, the photographer and I turned up at the allotted time. The children were eating their lunch when we arrived but the carer pointed to them and told them to go outside and have their photo taken. I sat on a very small chair at a very small table with these two small people and pretended to stack alphabet blocks and look up for the photographer who loomed above us. The photographer got increasingly short tempered when one of the children did not follow the instructions properly – he was not looking up in the manner that he had been told – but eventually the required photo was taken and the children could return to their lunch. As I

had sat on that small chair at the level of an adult's knees, I felt the powerlessness of being a child and it was something that stayed with me throughout the course of the study.

While research that seeks the perspectives of children and seeks to understand their lives is challenging, it can also be intensely rewarding. Children can have a clarity, a way of cutting through the tangle of adult concerns to see things as they are, not as they should be, and to remind us what is important. As a parent I already knew this. As a researcher I have come to appreciate the importance of leaving time to put aside adult concerns and study children in the here and now, and to treat their concerns seriously. I leave the final word to Helen Roberts of Barnados:

It is clear that listening to children, hearing children, and acting on what children say are three very different activities, although they are frequently elided as if they were not ... Children have always been with us. There have always been people who have listened, sometimes there have been people who have heard, and perhaps less often, those who have acted wisely on what children have to say (Roberts 2000: 238).

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